The Playing Field

My own history lies between two cultures, my father’s white, American culture and my mother’s Japanese culture. The white side of my family is genetically mixed with British, French, Irish, Scottish, and Dutch descent but is more accurately described by their consistent ties to North and South Carolina where they have been raising their families for as long as I can trace back. The lives of my dad’s family seem to be all consistent with each other; they are all middle to lower class poor whites living in the Carolinas. This consistency was disturbed however, when my grandfather was able to attend Duke University through donations made by members of his church. There he met my grandmother and started his family and his successful career as an astronaut trainer and later a psychologist. Although my grandfather grew up in the lower class, his advantages of being a white, male in the United States during the 1940’s gave him enough mobility to still be economically successful. My grandmother was born with greater economic privilege by being raised in the middle class. However, she found her gender to be her disadvantage in America when she was denied her BS from Duke University due to the fact that she was a woman. Although both my grandparents had limiting factors in their life, the benefits they reaped from American society outweighed many of their disadvantages.

My grandfather was born and raised in North Carolina. His father died at a young age, leaving him and his three siblings to be raised by their mother. Despite their already low economic status, the death of his father placed an even heavier financial burden on their family. My grandfather however still had hopes to attend college, so when he was accepted into Duke University, he need to find money to fund his tuition. His church ended up stepping in and they gathered five hundred dollars to send him to college. My grandfather’s graduation from high school and admission into Duke we both huge stepping stones where he is from because he was the first sibling to actually graduate high school, let alone attend a school like Duke. My grandfather’s disadvantages came from his social class, however, he was able to overcome this disadvantage through his advantage of being a white male in the United States. During the 1950s there was, and still is, a favorability for whites to attend college. Racial discrimination was a driving part of society during the 1940s and my grandfather’s ability to exploit his whiteness and attend a university would not have been possible without the racism in America during this time. My grandfather was disadvantaged by his low economic status, but he was in a system that favored white males, which allowed him to work within American society to go to a good university and find a stable job out of college. After he graduated from Duke he worked for the air force where he trained astronauts and tested different physical circumstances that scientists assumed astronauts would encounter in space. He was working on the forefront of the space race, which ended up funding thousands of jobs.[[1]](#footnote-1) My grandfather was able to use his job experience in the air force to accelerate his career which he found while working for the University of Florida. The start of my grandfather’s career and the funding for my own father’s family came from a job that was completely funded due to the fact that America was competing with the Soviet Union to explore outer space. Due to my grandfather’s whiteness and advantages as a male, he was able to have a sense of economic mobility, which pulled him out of the lower class and into the middle class. This jump of classes was also funded by the fact that America was in a space race with the Soviet Union and therefore provided a job that my grandfather could use to jumpstart his career.

My grandfather met my grandmother, while they both attended Duke University. The difference however was that my grandfather was able to graduate from Duke University while my grandmother was denied her BS. My grandmother was raised in a white middle class neighborhood and was fortunate enough to have enough money to attend Duke. At Duke, she studied medical technology and took all the same courses the men took. However, when she was about to finish her studies in 1949, she decided to take another semester of courses to get her BS. When attempting to do so, Duke did not allow her to get her BS because they said she was a woman and would not need it anyways. In my grandmother’s case, she did have the privilege of being middle class and being able to afford college, but she was disadvantaged by being a woman which caused her to be denied her BS. It is evident that the limits to her achievement in education clearly mimic the expectation for women during this time. Her studies at Duke ended in 1949, just a few years after the end of WWII. The war provided an opportunity for women to join the workforce when all the men were enlisted in the military. However, when the war ended, women were expected to go back to their roles as a housewife and step aside for the returning soldiers.[[2]](#footnote-2) My grandmother got her education and was looking to be part of the workforce but American society did not see her with a career but instead saw her as a housewife. Despite the changes that WWII caused in the American workforce, it was still a man’s world and women were expected to understand that they were not the priority.

The experiences I found within my family tree lead me to see how my family has never been a victim of the racial disadvantaged in America. My dad’s side of the family is all white and any race besides caucasian was not introduced until my siblings and I were born. My dad’s family has really been able to exploit the white privilege that is so prevalent in American society to have greater class mobility. Although many of my white ancestors didn’t have a lot of money, my grandfather was able to raise his economic status by his greatest advantage, being a white male. Seeing the differences between my grandfather's experience in my grandmother's experience led me to see how many advantages and disadvantages in American society do not carry the same weight. I believe in a way everyone can make it in America but not everyone will have to work as hard to reach success. Being a white male living in the upper class for example makes it easy for them to “make it” in America. However, being a female, non white, lower class person in America makes it much harder. Being white clearly is the biggest advantage someone can have, followed by being male, and lastly followed by being born in the upper to middle class. Everyone has a chance in America, but the thought of an equal playing field is far from the truth.

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