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The Influence of Aristocratic Communities' Competition on Happiness

Introduction

Throughout centuries in the vibrant world of high society, people of all ages have immersed themselves into the elegant but vicious culture of competitive circles. Bon vivants with generations of wealth supporting them seemingly live carefree lives of ornate halls and exquisite dining, but their extravagance is far from blithe. These flaunts lead members of the upper class to create false personas for the purpose of maintaining semblance and meeting expectations; they root from a societal pressure to upstage incessantly. This perpetual competitive state is isolating. In the absence of financial adversities, wealthy family members have no obligation to establish a support system. They cease to prioritize relationships, shifting their focus to preserving and improving their self-image - organically drifting apart and becoming friendly rivals. With time, family members morph into contenders, and emotions are swept under the rug to hide vulnerability and maintain a posh reputation. As discussed by Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton from the Center for Health and Well-being at Princeton University, "emotional well-being refers to... the frequency and intensity of experiences of joy, stress, sadness, anger, and affection that make one's life pleasant or unpleasant... [They] conclude that high income buys life satisfaction but not happiness" (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010). This conclusion is evident in high-income families who face jealousy, greed, and loneliness as they compete to impress others. As the Dalai Lama explains, "what characterizes happiness at [a] deeper level is the sense of fulfillment that you experience. While the joy of the senses is brief, the joy at this deeper level is much longer-lasting. It is true joy" (Dalai Lama et al., 2016). An environment that lacks sincerity prevents the fostering of genuine love and support - a roadblock for the Dalai Lama's "true joy." The constant state of competition that must be upheld in aristocratic communities serves as a barrier to happiness by preventing individual fulfillment and interfering with the formation of healthy social connections.

Satisfaction and Appreciation

The struggles of the "once percent," an oxymoron few have considered delving into, stem from a superficial ploy to constantly impress others. To identify the cause of these struggles is to delve into the reality that lies beneath appearances. A study referenced by Kahneman and Deaton established that there is, "a possible association between high income and a reduced ability to savor small pleasures" (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010). Kahneman and Deaton further discuss how, past a degree of stable income, elements like disposition and life circumstances restrict individuals' emotional well-being. It becomes clear: a person past the economic threshold with poor disposition and complex life circumstances will struggle to be happy.

When an individual learns that small pleasures have no value, the domino effect begins. Since high expectations yield low satisfaction, an individual accustomed to luxuries will have minimized opportunities for joy. For instance, if a child receives a bicycle as a gift after walking to school for years, he or she will feel the Dalai Lama's "true joy" through his or her gratitude for the gift giver. However, if that child habitually travels to school in a luxurious car, and his or her family upgrades to an even better vehicle, the child's emotions attached to the new form of transportation look different. This concept of happiness relating to satisfaction and appreciation was proved by the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology in 1978. Researchers compared Illinois State Lottery winners with losers and with paralyzed accident victims. They surveyed the groups to measure their respective happiness levels, finding that most people have a set happiness level to which they return after peaked appreciation diminishes (Brickman et al., 1978). For wealthy individuals, their findings suggest that a cycle will form around infinitely wanting more. Regardless of whether an individual craves material items, power in a company, superior grades, etc, they will return to their normal happiness level after initial appreciation for an improvement fades - never satisfied with, or appreciative of, what they have.

Past the economic threshold at hand, the more an individual attains the less satisfied and appreciative he or she becomes. This is defined by Garry Runciman, a historical sociologist and researcher at Trinity College in Cambridge, through his principle of egoistic relative deprivation. "If Person A does not have X, Person A knows of other persons that have X, Person A wants to have X, and Person A believes obtaining X is realistic," (Runciman, 1966) then all of Runciman's conditions are met and that person falls victim to egoistic relative deprivation, feeling unfairly treated because "X" was negated to them. When considering wealthy children, this idea contributes to the promotion of competition and resentment, which worsens as the child grows up in their community exposed to even wealthier individuals. The Local Ladder Effect, which explains the phenomenon, was the result of a study by the University of California, Berkeley where, "individuals higher in socioeconomic status experienced elevated subjective well-being because they felt more powerful and more accepted in their social groups" (Anderson et al., 2012). The problem with this expectation of control and belonging is that, as the J-curve of relative deprivation by James Davies examines, expectations and reality increasingly diverge over time; the growing gap between them prevents an individual's satisfaction. Low expectations, which yield greater joy more frequently, exist at lower rates amongst wealthy children who constantly face egoistic relative deprivation and the Local Ladder Effect. This leaves a void in their sense of fulfillment, deepening their competitive craving for more and reducing their happiness over time.

Connectivity

Aside from the factors of gratitude and expectations, family income also contributes to family connectivity, a key ingredient for individual happiness. A 2016 Case Western University study demonstrated that, "the richer a family gets, the smaller the reduction in negative emotions gained by the marginal dollar increase in household income," (Clingsmith, 2016) proving that an economic threshold influences emotions. As families become wealthier, they struggle to minimize their problems, isolated by competition and lacking the familial support system typically built around shared adversity. Professors Ferdi Botha and Frikkie Booyen's *Family Functioning and Life Satisfaction and Happiness in South African Households* discusses, "the importance of supportive intra-family dynamics in fostering greater individual well-being" (Botha & Booyen, 2014). Their findings suggest that poorer families have a codependency and connectivity, generally superior to that of rich families, which contributes to their happiness. This is because in aristocratic families, where internal affairs are managed with a filter for the individual preservation of mien, these "supportive intra-family dynamics" are never given the opportunity to form. Since flaws are hidden, even from one's closest relatives, family members are not equipped to serve as an effective support system. The dysfunction that materializes as wealthy families stop opening up to each other breeds negative emotions (Delamontagne, 2010). Without an avenue to vent or seek advice, individuals can become overwhelmed and struggle to maintain their happiness.

Furthermore, prosperous countries tend to be less connected since wealthy families are less likely to join religious or social organizations (Paul, 2005). This distances individuals from the love and compassion needed to achieve the Dalai Lama's "true joy" even more, as reflected by the cross-culture and cross-development analytical model *Which Ethics Will Make Us Individually and Socially Happier?* where poorer and more religious countries (as opposed to other countries considered) like Colombia and Mexico top the charts (Zagonari, 2009). Less developed nations in terms of equality and governmental integrity are reported to house happier citizens, highlighting that social norms like religion predominantly control emotions.

By comparing nations' life satisfaction as opposed to individuals', ethical norms of behavior (trustworthiness, generosity, etc) come to light as factors, separate from health and income, influencing happiness (Clark et al., 2018). As discussed in *The Origins of Happiness: The Science of Well-Being over the Life Course* by behavioral economics researchers Andrew E. Clark, Sarah Flèche, Richard Layard, Nattavudh Powdthavee, and George Ward, "networks of social support ('bonding capital') [and] openness and tolerance ('bridging capital')" (Clark et al., 2018) influence life satisfaction and happiness through their determination of personal freedom. These links describe relationships at different societal hierarchy levels amongst institutions or people, with bonding capital referring to what happens within exclusive network closures (similar people with strong trust ties- like family units) and bridging capital referring to what happens between inclusive structural holes (differing people with weak trust ties- like citizen groups). Bonding capital influences an individual's ability to "get by" and be happy while bridging capital affects success and "getting ahead." Individuals must first "get by" in order to "get ahead" and poor connectivity between "close" wealthy individuals prevents them from blooming. In an aristocratic community where expected competition grows resentment, preventing healthy bonding capital connections while promoting problematic ones, happiness is capped.

Conclusion

Happy communities with satisfied individuals must be humanity's primary goal, not the creation of wealth. Quality of life and the economy must be balanced by people and organizations alike in order to, at the very least, preserve human sanity and promote societal improvement. In high income families where tangible struggles do not require attention, relationships and mental health should in theory thrive. Since they do not, it becomes clear that this problem would require a restructuring of human thought processes in order to be resolved - something unreasonable to expect from competitive lineages that struggle to admit faults. With the determined roots of individual happiness (self perception within one's community and "true joy" cultivating relationships) and the power of governmental or macro-communal standards in influencing individual contentment, it is reasonable to expect a political solution to this problem.

Given that, "income inequality accounts for only two percent or less of the variance in happiness across the population[,...][that] the critical factors affecting a person's happiness are their relationships and their mental ... health[,...][and that] more people are in misery due to mental illness than to poverty, unemployment, or physical illness," (Clark et al., 2018) policymakers are clearly not prioritizing civil happiness. If they were to focus on well-being, they could easily change the situation. Knowing that childhood heavily influences adulthood happiness and that controlling family conduct across sociological groups that culturally differ (of different races, classes, religions, etc.) would be out of line for federal law, the only environment in which to take action is public education.

If academic institutions prepared children for adulthood by teaching them to be successful, healthy, **and** happy, alumni would emerge better adults, improved as individuals and ready to take on society. Schools could review the factors that produce or inhibit happiness, identify areas where policies to promote students' mental health could be established, and eventually exercise a full scale implementation of these policies. "Academic performance is a less important predictor [for success] than emotional health and behavior, which is shaped tremendously by schools, individual teachers, and parents" (Clark et al., 2018); by introducing health curriculum reform, teaching children about gratitude and being vicariously happy instead of jealous, both schools and educators could help set up children to be happy adults- regardless of whether they are working with or against home bred values.

It must be recognized that wealthy families could place their children in private schools, continuing to promote harmful conditions that result in unhealthy emotions and prevent happiness. In this case, aristocratic communities' competitive nature would have to be attacked in adulthood. The psychological patterns of wealthy adults discussed in this paper do not indicate that bringing attention to individuals' particular warped views would be in any way effective. For this reason, it would be best to create situations where wealthy adults could realize their struggles with satisfaction, appreciation, and connectivity "independently." Creating opportunities for these individuals to gain perspective would counteract egoistic relative deprivation and the Local Ladder Effect. For example, if wealthy individuals were encouraged to volunteer often at places like food banks or homeless shelters, exposed to individuals that lack basic necessities, they would see that their own struggles are relatively minute, minimizing them and replacing them with newfound appreciation. Economist Frank Knight's *The Ethics of Competition* states that,

"in a social order where all values are reduced to the money measure..., a considerable fraction of the most noble and sensitive characters will lead unhappy and even futile lives. Everyone is compelled to play the economic game and be judged by his success in playing it, whatever his field of activity or type of interest, and has to squeeze in as a side line any other competition, or noncompetitive activity, which may have for him a more intrinsic appeal" (Knight, 1923).

This quote skillfully depicts the aristocratic competition's pressure and how it obstructs individuals' path to fulfilled potential. The wealthy's inherent competitiveness is not fueled by passion or enterprise but by a deeply rooted need for validation. If one grows up jealous of others that "have it better" or "flawless" relatives, one will become preoccupied with catching up to an unattainable curated standard, losing sight of individuality. Wealthy individuals who endlessly aspire to achieve unreasonable goals for the purpose of impressing fellow community members will never experience the "true joy" that the world has to offer.