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Article

Paradox and privilege: A 55-year follow-up of the mortality of Yale College graduates

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Two hypotheses were tested: 1. People from privileged backgrounds had better survival than those from less privileged backgrounds. 2. The advantages of privilege were vitiated by fraternity membership.
Methods: A 55-year retrospective cohort study of survival since 1960 of 945 graduates of Yale College followed to 2015.
Results: The survival of graduates of private secondary schools (the privileged group) did not differ from that of public school graduates. However, graduates of private secondary schools who had not joined a fraternity in college had significantly better survival than private school graduates who had joined fraternities and than public school graduates, whether fraternity members or not.
Conclusions: The benefits of a privileged background in respect of survival were undermined by fraternity membership. It is suggested that both self-selection and substance mis-use may have contributed to the survival difference.

1. Introduction

A case study of the Yale College class of 1960 makes it possible to contribute to an increasingly complex understanding of the relationship between social privilege and mortality. Since the 1920s, it has been known that public school graduates who came to elite colleges with less social privilege than their private school peers perform better academically than graduates of private preparatory schools attending those same institutions (Spencer, 1927, cited in Zweigenhaft, 2009). More recent studies of graduates of elite colleges such as Yale, Harvard, and other northeastern private institutions confirm those earlier results and show in addition that prep school and public school graduates tend to pursue different kinds of careers, the former in business and the latter in academia and the professions (Zweigenhaft, 1992, 1993a, 1993b). Thus differences in secondary school background reflect differences in economic and social advantages which in turn have shaped both collegiate experiences and subsequent occupational choices (Karabel, 2005). We hypothesized that such social advantage would also influence health and survival. Many studies have shown that social and economic advantages in early life influence subsequent health, making such a hypothesis plausible (Hayward & Gorman, 2004; Beebe-Dimmer et al., 2004; Elo & Preston, 1992).

Complicating the impact of relative advantage and disadvantage, however, are numerous studies of the impact of fraternities on college performance and health-related behaviors. In general such studies show that people who join fraternities are more likely to have had a history of drinking before they joined; that drinking, the use of other substances (including tobacco), and unsafe sex are more frequent among fraternity members; and that academic achievement is lower. On the other hand, short term follow-up of fraternity and non-fraternity members indicates that the drinking of members declines after they leave college (Borsari & Carey, 1999; Sher, Bartholow, & Nanda, 2001; McCabe et al., 2005; Scott-Sheldon, Carey, & Carey, 2008; Cheney, Harris, Gowin, & Huber, 2014). The association between fraternity membership and alcohol use is not invariable, but is dependent to a large extent upon the cultural context created by colleges themselves (Weitzman & Chen, 2005; Weitzman & Kawachi, 2000). In general, however, the behavioral norms in fraternities at many institutions are such that we would expect that one consequence of membership might be to vitiate the survival benefits of early social

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advantage. Thus our second hypothesis is that membership in fraternities has had an adverse impact on the survival of members. This is consistent with the recognition that the effects on health of secondary group membership (social capital) may be mixed, beneficial in some contexts and damaging in others (Kunitz, 2007).

Fraternities are not the only formal organizations that exist on college campuses. There are athletic teams, singing groups, service clubs, and, especially at Yale which is the source of the data for the present study, the well-known senior secret societies such as Skull and Bones, Wolf's Head, and several others. Membership in each of these, like membership in fraternities, may also create friendship networks that provide support during and even after college, with potential consequences on health, both short and long-term. Far less is known about the consequences of membership in such organizations than is known about fraternities.

2. Methods

We use data from the Yale College class of 1960, the most recent collected in 2015 on the occasion of the 55th reunion. (Unlike some other universities, there is only one undergraduate college.) The data all come from publicly available sources, including yearbooks, reunion books, and published necrologies. The major source of information is the class book published at graduation. Data were provided by the students themselves as well as records maintained by the university (The Yale Class Book, 1960). Each entry listed name; date and place of birth; parents' names; family members who had attended Yale (legacies); high school or schools attended before coming to Yale; major; residential college (one out of ten); activities in residential college; fraternity membership, senior society membership; academic honors; extra-curricular activities; roommates; plans for future occupation; home address as of spring 1960. Also included was whether the student had received scholarship assistance, and for how many semesters. The amount of aid was not given. The data were entered into a spread sheet for a study of the class members and the impact of growing up in the 1940s and 1950s and emerging from college as the political and cultural changes of the 1960s were becoming apparent (Horowitz, 2015).

To these were added mortality data from the Class Directory published for the 55th reunion (Yale 1960 Class Directory, 2015). Deaths through 2014 had been recorded cumulatively over the preceding 55 years, as reported by surviving family members and friends. Twenty-two additional deaths were found in the publicly available Social Security Death Index and obituaries in Ancestry.com and on the internet. Statistical analyses include chi-square tests as well as logistic and Cox regressions. For the latter, number of years of survival since graduation in 1960 was the dependent variable. JMP 11 was used for the analyses.

Several measures of social advantage were used: graduation from a private secondary school and whether or not the student had relatives who attended Yale. *A priori* it was expected that the former would be more likely than the latter to reflect social advantage of the students' family of origin as relatives who attended Yale might not be a parent but brothers, cousins, uncles and other more distant kin whose economic status might have had no impact on the students' circumstances. Therefore in several of the analyses attention is devoted primarily to the type of secondary school attended.

In the context we studied, fraternity membership, too, is a measure of social advantage. In many colleges, the financial implications of joining a fraternity were different from what obtained at Yale. Elsewhere members lived in fraternity houses and/or took their meals there and did not pay the college for room and board. In contrast, at Yale, all students (except the handful of the married ones) lived and paid for all their meals in residential colleges. Consequently, although fraternities offered scholarships for some students on financial aid, joining a fraternity meant that members paid for meals twice, to their fraternities and to the university, as well as other fees. This meant that fraternity membership was more stratified than in many other institutions. Students generally entered fraternities in their early college years. There were 9 of them and about 40% of the class were members.

Some students were also chosen for membership in the prestigious, aboveground senior "secret" societies which publicly listed their members. In many cases, these societies emphasized the social sorting that reinforced social stratification. Each had fifteen members who met twice a week. The most prestigious and mysterious of these "spooks" were those founded in the nineteenth century, housed in "tombs" located on or near campus. As there were 7 such societies, only about 10% of the class was selected for membership, chosen ("tapped") in the spring of their junior year.

Intramural sports and *a cappella* singing groups were also common at Yale, as at many other institutions. The best known of the singing groups was the Whiffenpoofs. About 15% of the class were members of such groups, and 48% participated in intramural athletics.

3. Results

At entry in 1956, the entire class, slightly above 1000 who entered but 945 who graduated, was male; 81% from east of the Mississippi; 1.5% from abroad; 37% were legacies (had a relative associated with Yale); almost 99% were Caucasian; and 75% received no scholarship aid. Almost 60% (59.8) of the students were from private schools, disproportionately from a handful of elite boarding schools. Much has changed in the years since, of course, including the admission of women and minorities, greater financial aid, fewer legacies, and a diminution in the proportion of students from private schools, to say nothing of the changing mix of students who attended elite secondary schools and, more generally, the composition of the American population.

As displayed in Table 1, students with relatives who had attended Yale were especially likely to have graduated from a private school. Both legacy and private school graduation were associated with a lower likelihood of having received scholarship aid and of having been on the Dean's list and with an increased likelihood of having been in a fraternity, secret society, and/or *a capella* singing group. As indicated in Table 2, fraternity members, whether from private or public schools, were less likely to have been on the Dean's list than non-members.

As displayed in Table 3, panels A and B, being a legacy student as well as a private school graduate were each independently associated with membership in a fraternity and in a secret society. In addition, Panel C shows that fraternity membership was strongly associated with subsequent membership in a secret society. Thus, a filtering mechanism was at work: social advantage before entering college was associated with an increased likelihood of joining a fraternity, and fraternity membership was associated with lower academic performance as well as with an increased likelihood of being chosen for a secret society.

3.1. Mortality

As shown in Table 4, the two measures of early social advantage – legacies and type of school attended before college – are not associated with increased risk of having died before 2015; nor is having received scholarship aid and participation in singing groups and athletic teams during college, or membership in a