

END OF SEMESTER STATEMENT OF BELIEFS

Rob Warren ~ SOC 3452

I grew up in Maryland. My mom lived on a horse farm in a rural area—a county that became a suburban area while I lived there until I was 18. My dad lived in Washington, D.C., but I only went there on the weekends. So, this is really a story about my life in Maryland.

My elementary school from kindergarten through 5th grade was in smaller public schools in Brandywine, MD. My memory is that the teachers were older—they had worked in the schools for a long time. Most were white, but some were African American. The students were about half white and half African American, mixed together in the same classes. It never occurred to me—although it does now after having lived through SOC 3452—that there were more African American students than teachers. Some of my best grade school friends were African American. My memory is that there were not any “ability groups” or “tracks”—kids were in classes together and worked together regardless of their reading level or their skill level in other subjects. But I could have been wrong about that—maybe kids who were really different from me were in separate classes. I don’t remember having any difficulties through 5th grade—I never got in trouble, got mostly good grades (except that one music class in third grade where I got a C- and the teacher noted that I “talked and played in class”). However, I also don’t remember being a star student or anything like that.

To start 6th grade, my mom moved me to a different public-school further south in Maryland and further away from Washington, D.C. Looking back, and in light of some things we discussed in SOC 3452, I wonder whether she was (at least unconsciously) moving us away from poor people and African Americans? Anyway, this meant that the students in my new school were mainly white farm kids—many of whom were fairly poor—with a few wealthier suburban white kids. I don’t remember there being that many racial/ethnic minority kids in my classes in middle school (6th through 8th grades). It could be that the school was mostly white; it could be that I was in different classes than the racial/ethnic minority students. I don’t know. I do remember the grades were divided by numbers (e.g., 6-1, 6-2, 6-3) where the latter number indicated whether you were in the advanced/honors track, the general track, or the remedial track. Anyway, I really excelled in middle school—got good grades and so forth. I seem to remember the teachers using a lot of non-traditional classroom strategies where I could learn at my own pace; that really worked for me. I was lucky.

I went to one large public high school—again, in Southern Maryland—for all four years. By the time I was in 9th grade, the county was becoming more suburban. This meant that there were more wealthy neighborhoods and kids, most of them white. But it also meant there were more middle-class African Americans who were leaving Washington, D.C. and the closer-in suburbs. So, my high school had quite a mix of students in terms of race/ethnicity, economic circumstances, and farm/suburban/urban background. In high school, I pretty much only took “honors” or AP or similar courses. Even the 9th grade English and math courses had so-called ability levels—upper and lower. This meant that I generally didn’t have classes or social activities with kids who were very different from me. My high school teachers were OK, but

what really engaged me were academically-oriented extracurricular activities. Debate team. Science fairs. Math team. Stuff like that. I ended up excelling in high school—I was the valedictorian.

I got no real guidance or help in thinking about college. I only had a handful of conversations with my parents—mostly enough to know that they'd help pay for it, which was a luxury I appreciated. I don't remember any conversations with school counselors or teachers; most of my classmates didn't go to college, and those who did generally went to the local community college or maybe the University of Maryland. But, because I did well on standardized tests and got good grades, I got lots of letters and catalogues in the mail from colleges. I have no idea how I picked the college I did—Carleton College in Northfield, MN. I only applied to three colleges and gave almost no thought to how to decide where to apply. Carleton seemed good, so I enrolled. My parents payed for a lot of it (with loans), I knew I would do a ton of work-study, and I knew I'd probably work at some other job off campus.

Carleton is an elite liberal arts college where all of the students are high-achieving, the classes are small, and all the instructors are very accomplished and generally very good classroom instructors. Pretty much everyone lives on campus, so you never really get away from school. Dorms had parties and fun, but they also lots of study groups and so on. I did OK academically at Carleton (mostly got B's) but I found a home in the Sociology/Anthropology department ... mainly because of a couple of very charismatic and skilled classroom teachers. They made the material exciting, related it well to real life. I never met with professors outside of class (most students did, I think) and I never participated in study groups or anything like that. I worked almost full time—in the cafeteria, delivering pizza, etc.—and that took a lot of my time. Looking back after SOC 3452, it occurs to me that Carleton's students were almost all white, virtually all upper-middle class. This didn't fully occur to me at the time.

Most people think carefully about where to attend graduate school. Not me! I followed a woman I was dating to Madison, WI and enrolled in their Sociology PhD program as an afterthought—as something to do. Turns out, it was (at the time) the top PhD program in the country. For the same reasons that I liked the debate team and science fairs and things in high school, I liked graduate school. And, I had one great faculty mentor (Robert M. Hauser) who gave me lots of fantastic opportunities, financial support, and advice. I worked closely with him, his wife, and the team of graduate students around him for all seven years of graduate school. Some of those people are still close friends. In part because I had such great support, I did very well in graduate school.

In my original essay, I wrote: "Looking back, I'd say that early in my education (through high school) I had about average schools and teachers and then later in my education (college and graduate school) I had exceptional teachers/mentors and schools." Now, after SOC 3452, I'd say I was very lucky throughout, and always had "at least OK" teachers. I was also lucky enough to go to a top liberal arts college and a top graduate program. My guess—especially at the end of this semester—is that I had more opportunities than most students throughout—from kindergarten through graduate school. Sometimes I can see how or why: Doing well in high

school gave me college opportunities. Being at a top college gave me all sorts of opportunities (and I never would have been admitted to my graduate program had I not attended such a top school ... I never would have made it on my grades, essays, or test scores). In other cases, I don't really fully see how or why I had more opportunities. I suspect that I got more opportunities, better curriculum, and higher achieving classmates in grade school and high school, but I'm not sure. This class has better attuned me to the fact that as a white male, there were all sorts of obstacles and barriers I never faced (and was not aware that others faced). I just can't say now specifically how racial privilege helped me along the way.

My educational opportunities in grade school and high school were certainly influenced by where I happened to live and in ways I didn't fully appreciate until going through SOC 3452. My schools were OK, but I know now that there were private schools and wealthy suburban schools that had far more resources, fewer students per teacher, more counseling, and more of other opportunities. My schools were fine—they are not like what I see in pictures of inner-city Detroit schools, for example—but they didn't have a lot of "extras" that might have made a difference. For example, I really had no advising about colleges even though I was a top student in my high school.

On the other hand, my college opportunities had a lot to do with how much money my family had while I was growing up. My dad had a good job in the federal government and my mom was a community college administrator. My family wasn't exactly rich, but when it came time for college, they had the resources to support me going to a top (and very expensive) college. It also helped that they went to college themselves: They never questioned whether it would be worth the money, and they certainly expected me to go to college somewhere.

I know enough to realize that being a white male has to have changed my educational opportunities and experiences in important ways. Again, though, I'm not sure I can really articulate how. I know now, after this class, that racial/ethnic minority students usually face obstacles and challenges that I didn't have to face. Maybe it was as subtle as assumptions that people made about how smart or promising I was. I also suppose that most women face challenges in schools—perhaps especially in math and science—that I didn't face. It's hard for me to clearly say how or why being a white male gave me more opportunities and improved my experiences. I have no idea how my orientation as a heterosexual made any difference in my educational career. Again, my guess is that it's a matter of my not facing challenges that other people had to face. A result of this class is that I'm more aware of the challenges, obstacles, and barriers that others often face. I'm still working out how those things benefited me.

I guess one thing I've come to appreciate from taking SOC 3452: Just because I am not personally---as a white, heterosexual man---racist, sexist, or homophobic doesn't mean that I don't actively benefit from the legacy of previous white, heterosexual men. We live in a society where racism, sexism, and homophobia structure almost all aspects of society. That makes life easier for me no matter how "woke" I am personally.

I think that my success in my educational career—valedictorian in high school, great college, top PhD program—are due to a mix of a lot of hard work, a fair amount of good luck, and (to an important degree) some accidents of birth. I know that hard work mattered for my success: If I hadn't worked hard in high school, I wouldn't have made it to Carleton. If I hadn't worked hard in college, I wouldn't have been accepted in my PhD program. If I hadn't worked hard there, I wouldn't have been successful. But, being a white male with relatively well-off parents absolutely made a difference (for reasons explained above). I'm also sure that good luck has helped at many points along the way. For example, I more or less picked my college randomly. I could easily have gone to a school that suited me worse, or that didn't give me the opportunities Carleton did. For another example, there was a lot of luck involved in my applying and being admitted to my PhD program; there was even more great good luck in finding the faculty mentor that I found. Again, just by luck it could easily have gone much worse. So, it's a mixture: The advantages of being born a moderately well-off heterosexual white male, some good luck, and hard work led to success. I don't know where'd I'd be without all three.

Can anybody "get ahead" in America? I think every single person has *some* chance of being successful. The chances are higher if the person works hard. The chances are lower if (for example) the person has less money or is a racial/ethnic minority. And, for every person, luck is heavily involved. Good things and bad things totally out of the person's control can matter. What this all adds up to is this: Hard work is usually necessary for "getting ahead." But, it doesn't guarantee it. Bad luck happens. And, people not lucky enough to be born into circumstances and bodies and families like mine frequently face obstacles that limit how much they can "get ahead" regardless of their good luck or hard work. Can anybody "get ahead" by getting a good education? Sure. Will everybody? Absolutely not. Who gets ahead depends on a combination of hard work, luck, and accidents of birth. SOC 3452 has further convinced me of the roles of luck and accidents of birth.

A final note about what I learned in SOC 3452. I think I have come to appreciate, because of this class, the need to work for social change on two distinct fronts. First, it is essential and necessary to help people who currently face difficult circumstances, oppression, unfairness, and inequality. African American or Latino immigrant or poor kids need help with schoolwork; they need tutoring and somebody to read to them and somebody to encourage them and give them hope. They need those things right now. Second, at the same time, we need to work to change the policies and practices and injustices that created those problems in the first place. Tutoring kids in an after-school program or helping in a Head Start program will help some kids today, but unless we change the broader social and political forces that create the need for those programs, we are not getting anywhere. This class has taught me that we have to do the first thing—helping kids now—while simultaneously pursuing the second. Helping kids without fighting for better policies or the eradication of broader injustice is charitable, but ineffective in the long run. Fighting for social change without helping kids now is inhumane. We have to do both. This class has crystalized these ideas for me.