How do affluent, urban folks feel about their lifestyles?
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Nadine, who inherited a lot of money from her parents, has a running argument with her partner, who grew up in a middle-class family, about whether their children should spend the summer researching harbor seals in Alaska or working in a greasy spoon. Both parents do not want their kids to feel entitled, but also are determined to provide them with opportunities to enrich their lives. Remembering the value of the “crappy jobs” she held when she was young, Nadine’s partner is even ambivalent about whether to have the children finance their education through loans and work or pay their college tuition.

How to ensure that children do not become “entitled” is one of several rich people’s problems addressed in *Uneasy Street*. Relying on conversations with 50 wealthy New Yorkers (whose
annual household incomes exceed $250,000) and 30 service providers to elite families, Sherman
(an associate professor of sociology at the New School for Social Research and Eugene Lang
College in New York City) explores how affluent, urban folks feel about their lifestyles. As her
title indicates, Sherman’s subjects are uneasy about the choices they have made about how they
spend their money and raise their children. Her book is a useful addition to a growing literature
about the implications of inequality in the United States in the 21st century.

In its broad themes – how affluent Americans talk about “their own entitlements and obligations
and those of their spouses and children” – Uneasy Street rarely departs from the conventional
wisdom. Appropriating the cultural vocabulary of the middle class, Sherman reminds us, they
emphasize traditional values, including hard work, prudent consumption, engaged parenting, and
giving back. And they deal with discomfort about privilege by managing individual affect rather
than turning to (or on) social structure and income distribution.

As she deconstructs the comments of her respondents, Sherman's analysis is informative,
insightful, and nuanced. Wage-earning professionals, she indicates, saw their income as
precious, to be saved; men and women who did not work felt dependent and, at times, guilty;
inheritors often hesitated to spend money they did not earn. Disavowing conspicuous
consumption, the vast majority of Sherman's respondents maintained that their consumption,
except on special occasions, was basic and family-oriented.

Most interesting, perhaps, Sherman notes that most of the parents she interviewed wanted their
children to have “fluency outside the ‘bubble.’” They expressed more interest in having them
interact with children with less than those with more. They sought to foster attitudes akin to
noblesse oblige toward poor people. Acknowledging that behavior on this issue and others did
not necessarily match rhetoric, Sherman writes that "the fantasy here is that kids can have
material and experiential comforts" and understand that "it is possible to live without them."

In an admirably candid appendix, Sherman acknowledges that because wealthy people are
notoriously reluctant to submit to interviews, she ended up interviewing individuals she recruited
from her own personal and professional networks. Therefore, her methodology "sacrifices
generalizability and representativity in favor of depth."

Sherman’s "snowball sample" ultimately consisted of a sizable percentage of secular political
liberals (whose anxieties about wealth and inequality may not be shared by other rich
Americans). She could not confirm the actual income of her respondents. To protect
confidentiality, she did not identify individuals by race, modified some personal characteristics,
and didn’t specify which respondents were married to each other.

Sherman deems the likelihood that the compelling and colorfully-expressed anxieties of her
wealthy liberal New Yorkers about being illegitimately entitled are not representative, "counter-
intuitive." She may be right. But it’s appropriate, it seems to me, to approach her
generalizations with some skepticism.

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