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27 minutes by train and 45 by car is the metropolis of New York City. I moved to the United States when I was little, and settled in the suburbs outside of the city. When growing up I never realized what opportunities and different lifestyles lay so close to my doorstep. Honestly I did not appreciate the city for its diversity and hustle and bustle until recently. I become fascinated by the difference in teen environments from the suburbs’ to the city’s. It had always a treat to go to the city, but as we grew up it was interesting to see the allure of the teen life in the city which we tried to duplicate. Once arriving at college I really saw first hand the rarified kids that many girls in the burbs looked up to. I wanted to take this opportunity to explore and describe the social context of kids who have spent their lives living in the Upper East Side.

When going into this topic I had some preconceived ideas about what I thought their daily lives were like, some were correct and others were very far off. One of topics that my previous thoughts were different from reality was relatives’ proximity in the city. I had imagined that all of ones family lived a couple of blocks away from one another, however is a rarity. In this essay I will also cover ideas of city layout and friends, day-to-day life at private schools, and religion in a social context.

I mentioned above that I was interested in generational relationships living in the city, and if family was all very close in geographic proximity. I was disappointed at first to see my ideal image in my head of grandma being down the block, and cousins up stairs isn’t too frequent since 2 out of my 3 interviewees do not have this luxury. However I did find even if extended family wasn’t five minutes away they were 30, located in Brooklyn or in New Jersey. Although current family members were not up the stairs, city roots seem to be passed on from generation to generation. Either both or one my interviewee’s parents had grown up in the city as a kid. One interviewee did have an exception, Ross’ cousins lived 5 blocks from him, however he did express he was lucky and this was not the norm. Even though I did not find what I thought I would, an element of proximity still exists with families from the city I think. Both sides of Ross’s and Emi’s families are all located in New York or New Jersey. The furthest family is from the city in any of my interviewees cases is Philadelphia. There definitely is a relationship between proximity to extended family and living in the city. It is important to note that maybe I was looking what family is from the wrong angle. I had discovered while doing my interviews that the closest kinship on the Upper East side may not be blood related, rather a family friend.

Something that I had not expected when going into researching this topic was the discovery that family friends relationships are extremely common in the city. Parent’s college friends sometimes can take the spot as a role model for the other family’s children since they spend so much time together. As Emi puts it “you can basically call him my second dad”, in reference to her mom’s best college friend. Social activities between family friends usually aren’t limited to weekends. This phenomenon of social freedom I think is caused by the layout of the city. Proximity to friends is what makes spontaneous get togethers very frequent. Teens also have this luxury. When close friends live only 1 block down, it is easy to run over and walk back at midnight before bed. Which was the case for Emi with her friends from school. She would often hang at her house until 12 pm then head across the street to her bed. Being social is a large part of life as a kid growing up in New York. Since private schools themselves are so small it is important, and the environment is set up for it, to mingle between schools. Both interviewess remember middle school mixers between schools. Meeting new friends through a mutual friend is all too common. This is especially helpful during the college process to find other kids heading to the same school as you. That is actually how Emi and Liv met and now are roommates and sisters. All of the Emory bound city kids got together for lunches and brunches before hand. It was nice they all agreed to have a basis for a friend group before arriving. This core group of city kids is still a group today. Yet Ross had raised a caveat to being in such a homogeneous group of people.

“Out of a group of twenty boys and about 20 girls, I would say there are about three out of the forty that are not from the tri-state area. The frats we want to join are notorious for their brothers being primarily white, Jewish New Yorkers. People even think there is a city-suburbia divide, and to be honest for however much we hang out there might be. Our sub-conscious attitude is either your New York City or your not”

Even though this underlying factor is blunt, it is not to be perceived as automatically negative. It actually attests to one of my previous points about how the city creates a social cohesion so uniquely spontaneous and therefore incredibly bonding.

Another topic I explored was daily life at school for a kid attending a private high school in the Upper East Side. One major take away I got from listening to all of the stories from the great days in high school was that an under lying reason for many activities was social motivation. Where one would have lunch, which colleges were you applying to, who did you talk to? Were all to be considered before an action. One break in the cycle was the fact that schools had uniforms that allowed Emi to wake up 30 minutes before school and have time to walk to it. Uniforms were great for ease, but they also came with class distinction. She explained “The gray skirts were distinct for my school, at lunch there would be a gray skirt table and paid uniforms at another table, it was segregated.” The girls would either eat at specific café or when the weather was nice head to central park. There was one café in particular that was the go to spot- café euro. In central park the place to be seen was the great lawn. This was a hub for all the schools in city to socialize. If one were to stay in one circle it was considered lame. Even though each school had its own place to sit, showing your social connections was also important. Another social benchmark was which colleges one would apply to. The expectations not only come from peers, but also from the “best prep schools” out there. Since some students have predestined elite private schools from birth because of name, others need to compete. This creates inescapable bubble in NYC private schools for college performance, quite a stressful process. I quote Ross who said, “At a certain point [friends](http://nycautoethno.weebly.com/interview-1.html) can no longer be friends because they are competing for the same school and can only talk about college.” These social considerations were part of life as a New York high school student, and definitely elsewhere in the country, it just seemed more pronounced when listening to first hand accounts. Even though most people perceive that everything comes to those with no worries financially, this is not reality in the Upper East Side. Life can be socially very stressful. Warning clique: so world don’t judge a book by its cover.

Finally another take away from researching city kids from the Upper East Side was what role religion plays in social life. I originally imagined that temple was integral in mixing friend groups, and making new ones, however my ideas were not the case for my interviewees. Even though the Jewish traditions and culture including Bar and Bat mitzvahs were a normal part of each one of their lives, all three only attended temple on high holidays. The only exception being Emi, who only recently with her mom started to attend temple on Fridays for Shabbat. Even when moving to college where maybe the population demographic is not 1/3 Jewish like that of the Upper East Side, none of the interviewees used the Hillel as a way to meet people. I think this is due to our school in particular which has a large Jewish population, so the likelihood of that becoming a defining factor for a friendship or not is not explored.

When putting the pieces of city layout and friends and family, day-to-day life at private schools, and religion in a social context together it was a fun exploration for me to be an outsider able to look into what seemed so rarified while growing up. I think throughout this process getting first hand experiences has made me realize that we are more similar than originally I had thought. Every high school student goes through social stressors, but maybe not to the extreme as others do. One caveat to my previous statement is the spontaneous city life style, the ability to quickly have in person access to many of your friends so fast, is very unique to New York. Moving forward I will take my lessons with me and remember that everyone is just a kid, growing together. This chance to look into others lives really brought that concept home for my very day life.