

Is it nature or nurture
that allows some
people to succeed
while others fail

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Sociologists have often wondered what matters most, environment, or genetics. Is it nature or nurture that allows some people to succeed while others fail? In the screwball comedy of manners, *Trading Places*, this debate is questioned and put to test to find an answer. Millionaire commodity brokers Randolph and Mortimer Duke, played by Ralph Bellamy and Don Ameche respectively, are brothers who own the prestigious Duke & Duke financial firm. After a brief encounter with Billy Ray Valentine, played by Eddie Murphy, the two scheme to make a bet to find the answer to their long-standing "nature vs. nurture" argument.

Randolph believes genetics really makes a good businessman, it is in the blood. However, his brother Mortimer is almost positive that it is a person's surroundings, the environment they are in which causes them to become a success. Out of pure curiosity to find the truth, the brothers decide to take the lives of two unsuspecting victims and turn them upside down in order to discover their answer. The unlucky victim's chosen are one of the Duke's top commodity brokers, Louis Winthorpe III, played by Dan Aykroyd, and Billy Ray Valentine, a streetwise hustler.

The brothers arrange for their undercover employee, Clarence Beeks, to frame Winthorpe for theft and drug possession, creating a reason for him to be fired. After he is arrested and put in jail, they take away his posh New York townhouse, cut him off from all his financial accounts, and force his fianci?? and friends to hate him. Once Winthorpe's life is successfully destroyed, Valentine is dragged off the streets and is brought under the wings of the Dukes. He is introduced to the proper life of the Dukes as they

offer him Winthorpe's home and job, bringing in a starting salary of \$80, 000 a year.

The Duke brothers wonder if these new " environments" will cause Winthorpe to be no better than anyone else deprived of nurture, or " proper" surroundings, and Valentine to flourish as a successful businessman given the proper surroundings. Valentine moves into Winthorpe's home and in time starts to act responsibly. He begins to take great interest in the house, which he realizes is now his. In many ways he acted no differently than anyone else of wealth. He even begins to flourish as a commodity broker at Duke & Duke, making them all sorts of money.

His advice soon becomes so coveted that people stop what they are doing to listen whenever he speaks on economic matters, regardless of the color of his skin. He is now a man of prestige and therefore they will listen. A little common sense, some street smarts and a few " Grant's and Franklin's" in his pocket made him sound as logical and reasonable as any Harvard graduate would. Meanwhile, as this former con is succeeding, the former businessman is floundering. The uptight Winthorpe scrambles to make it on the streets, and soon befriends a prostitute, Ophelia, played by Jamie Lee Curtis.

The sympathetic prostitute takes him in and saves him from starvation - or worse. In the end, after their lives have been dramatically altered, the two men discover about the scheming brothers' plot, which was all carried out for a one-dollar bet. This enrages Winthorpe and Valentine and so the two unite to devise an even more fabulous revenge to prove their lives can not be controlled by the ever power-grubbing Duke brothers. The manipulated men

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trick the old millionaires into believing they have early information about the Department of Agriculture crop report on farm conditions.

Armed with the false information the brothers plan to purchase as much fruit commodities as possible. After the actual crop report is released, the old shysters discover they had false information and have been completely ruined. Their seat on the exchange is repossessed and all assets of Duke & Duke are taken from them to pay for the tremendous amount of stock they purchased. The poor man learned that money is not necessarily the answer to all his problems, and the rich man learned the true value of a dollar. Both men learned what real friends were.

However, what really causes men to become poor and turn to a life of crime, or become great successes in the business world and earn generous livings? Is it the environment he is born into, or is it really in his blood to be a success or failure? According to the movie, Trading Places, it seems as though it is a man's environment that determines whether or not he is successful. Mortimer Duke proved his brother Randolph wrong with their little experiment, finding that genetics really has nothing to do with the success of an individual. Winthorpe was born into wealth, bred to be proper and attend formal schools such as Harvard.

However, when all that was taken away from him, he did not know how else to react other than resort to crime to survive. Billy Ray Valentine, on the other hand, proved that given the right surroundings, he could adapt and be a success. He was born to a poor family, a broken home; the genes did not matter though. The Duke brothers proved through their little wager that it

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was solely ones surroundings influencing a person's motivation. This may be proven in the movie, however, not all sociologists hold this belief that nurture triumphs over nature in determining the success of an individual.

Human activity can be commonly understood as the attempt to obtain a variety of goods, some universal and some unique to the individual (based on our identity). The effectiveness with which we pursue and attain them has been the source of extensive debate as is the source of the valuations (nature versus nurture), but the fact that we are goal driven for some such goods is almost beyond question. It seems almost tautological: goods are, by definition, what we seek. Some goods, such as pleasure, are goods-in-themselves; others such as money can be defined as instrumental goods that can be used to obtain goods-in-themselves.

Organizations are assumed to maximize instrumental goods. It is common to see organizations usually striving for one instrumental good, profit. This in turn can be used by the individual owners to obtain goods-in-themselves. Take for example prostitution, a good-in-itself, which is seen in the movie *Trading Places*, as Winthorpe befriends the prostitute Ophelia. Functionalists view this good-in-itself as one that serves a function in society. Prostitution satisfies the needs of patrons that may not be readily met through more socially acceptable forms such as courtship or marriage.

That so-called "buyer" of the good receives sex without any sentimental attachment or responsibility for procreation. The "seller," or the prostitute, makes a living through the exchange. It is likely that Feminists would view Ophelia's role as a prostitute as exploitative and demeaning. They would

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speculate that she "fell" into prostitution because of the inadequate wages paid to women because of their economic dependence on men as a result of marriage and childbearing and because of a male demand for sex without love or responsibility. In the attempts to obtain different goods, we must take a look at the individual first.

There are different perspectives on viewing the individual identity: the genetic makeup or "nature," or the childhood environment and experiences or "nurture." Structuralists define identity strictly in terms of relationships and roles; a given person may have one, several, or no such identities. We see examples of this evident in *Trading Places*. In reality, Billy Ray Valentine is a street hustler, however he plays the role of the rich and successful commodity broker too. Winthorpe is in turn subjected to playing the role of a street bum while in reality he really is the wealthy moneygrubber.

Social identity theorists also observe the variety of groups we belong to and how different group identities become prominent under different social settings. We see in the movie that the wealthy commodity brokers are prominent in the society because they are in a social setting of higher class. In the very beginning of the movie, there is the scene where Valentine is passing by as Winthorpe is exiting Duke & Duke, a male-dominated organization, as Feminists would most likely point out. As he descends onto the sidewalk, the two men collide and Winthorpe drops his briefcase on the sidewalk.

Valentine picks up the briefcase and attempts to give it back to the snooty commodity broker, who in turn interprets the situation differently. He makes

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an assuming judgement, based solely on Valentine's looks, that he is trying to steal the briefcase. He shouts out at Valentine to just take it and spare his life. Two policemen are close by and overhear the two men and because of Winthorpe's prominent position in society, they automatically believe his accusations and begin chasing Valentine until they catch and arrest him. Conflict theorists would not overlook this situation either.

The continual struggle between the poor and rich helps to better understand social behavior. It proves how social order is maintained through the power of the wealthy, as they have control over the inferior poor in society.

Symbolic interactionists state that the prime determinant of human action includes one's interpretations and definitions of a situation. We engage in social interaction and self-reflection continually, which leads to constant changes in our interpretations of our situations and ourselves, understandings which correspond only indirectly, at best, with "real world" changes.

Interaction is not only what happens between people, but also within the person. We are actors who have a self which we constantly talk to. This self has developed as a combination from all the people we have cared about and all the roles we have played. This self is what makes us human, and distinguishes us from animals and everything else. Mead's leading student, Herbert Blumer, wrote that, with the mechanism of self-interaction the human being ceases to be a responding organism whose behavior is a product of what plays upon him from the outside, the inside, or both.

Instead he acts toward his world, interpreting what confronts him and organizing his action on the basis of the interpretation. That was exactly what Winthorpe did in that beginning scene. He made his own naive interpretation of the confronting situation with Valentine. He made false judgements on the street hustler and reacted based entirely on those judgements. Erving Goffman described the infinite number of conscious, semi-conscious, and unconscious ways in which we tell others who we want to be or who we are, as well as who we see them to be.

He characterized social life as dramatic, noting that the word "person" derives from the Latin word "personae," a theatrical term used for "mask." In the presence of others, the individual will use signs, dramatically portraying affirmative facts. They must mobilize their activity so that it will express during the interaction what he wishes to convey. There are many examples of this throughout the movie as different individuals wear "masks" to act their parts. Both Valentine and Winthorpe are forced to become actors, playing their new roles as nouveau riche and street hustler.

The Duke brothers wore masks as they deceitfully tricked Valentine into participating in their little experiment, not even intending to keep him as an employee after all the money he made them, all because the color of his skin. The butler Coleman wears a mask as he has to turn Winthorpe away at the door, forcing him to live out on the streets. Beeks wears a mask as he works undercover, framing Winthorpe and stealing the crop report towards the end of the film. Ophelia also wears a mask as she works the streets,

playing her role as prostitute; scenes where she is not playing that part, she is a completely different person.

Everyone seems to be wearing the masks Goffman describes. The past is important in this theory of interaction as well, not because it has shaped our personality, but rather because both the identity upon which our social life is dependent and the self with which we continually present are mixtures resulting from past social interaction. The past also provides the experiences which we use to evaluate the present and predict the future. Therefore, this theory would agree with Mortimer's idea that proper surroundings, or environment, will make a person successful rather than their genes, or heredity.

The nurture perspective is one which believes people are born with minds having nothing imprinted on them yet by the reactions of senses to the external world of objects and they are conditioned by early training and experiences. In 1895, Durkheim wrote that "social facts are things" that have a 'coercive' relation to the individual. "Most behavioral scientists and educators presume that education, parenting, and other early experiences collectively play the central role in shaping character, which in turn shapes subsequent behavior.

In seeing that this is true, it is evident that many believe a proper upbringing, one with respectable parents and a quality education, will further guarantee the likelihood of the success of an individual. Many believe that without those things, you will more than likely become a failure. In the beginning of the movie, when Billy Ray Valentine is being arrested and

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escorted out of Duke & Duke, Mortimer asks the young man, " Are you a product of a broken home young man? " Mortimer strongly senses that he is right that a bad environment can make a person a failure.

That is the reason why he wants to test his theory so he can prove his brother wrong, that success does not come solely from the blood, it is not all in a person's genes. Theorists present a structural view of identity, in which behavior largely emerges as a response to environmental conditions.

Structuralists look at social nooks that happen to be filled by a given entity.

The basic idea is that behavior, as well as identity, are environmentally determined by the structure of relationships in which people and institutions are embedded.

People with given identities do not create social structure; rather, social structure creates people to fill available slots. Positions, ones such as positions in different classes and positions of power, are what define people. Structural identity theories emphasize the importance of roles in understanding and predicting behavior. As a person changes position, so too his attributes and " personality" changes. This is clearly evident within the movie when places are traded between Winthorpe and Valentine.

The two undergo changes from high class to low class and vice versa. As the rich man lost his wealth and became poor, you could see an immediate change in personality. He becomes bitter and angry after his posh way of life is taken away from him. This results in his turn to crime to survive the mean New York City streets, as well as get revenge. However, in the very end, the

bitterness is subdued as he learns the real value of the dollar, overcomes his prejudices and becomes a more personable individual.

The poor street hustler also experienced an altering of personality as he gained his new position as a rich man. He learns the inside world of business and more about the life of the wealthy. He discovers how much power is given to an individual with great wealth and prestige and how that power controls those without it. This was obvious to him during the restaurant scene when everyone suddenly stopped to listen to what he had to say. Conflict theorists would look at that as the creation of a type of social order, where money creates power.

Placing more money in the hands of the wealthy instantaneously gives them more power over those without it. Learning the reality of all this makes Valentine truly value the dollar more and in the end he turns out to be a better mannered and sincere man. In an overall critique of the film, I would have to mainly support a theory which combines nurture and nature into one component of creating success. I do not see how Randolph could have had a strong argument for genetics being the sole influence of making or breaking the future of an individual.

However, I suppose he could have presented the fact that genetics can give a person certain characteristics, such as being extremely motivated and goal driven, hard working, strong willed, intelligent, or being a perfectionist. Such characteristics are things which are bestowed through genetics. Coming from a family who has a strong work ethic and is naturally intelligent can benefit an individual and help them along their way to success. Possessing

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characteristics such as those will motivate a person to want to continue their education.

Take for example, deciding to attend college. A college is a surrounding in which individuals gain more knowledge to help them be successful in life. Individuals are not born with complete knowledge of everything. Certain things have to be taught, and taught in certain surroundings, the correct environment. I suppose then, heredity and environment go hand in hand. A combination of the two is essential in determining the outcome of one's success. First, one must have that drive to excel.

To excel, one must be placed in the proper environment in which that is possible. It is evident that the initial drive is the genetic or heredity factor, the nature aspect of the theory. The appropriate surrounding then is the environment, or the nurture aspect of the theory. One can not possibly survive without the other. In believing this, I would have ended the film with both Randolph and Mortimer winning the bet, for if Valentine had not had the ardency inside, he would not have put forth effort in becoming an accomplished commodity broker.

Even Winthorpe's situation combines heredity and environment. Had he not strived to make his life better again, he would never have moved in with Ophelia or sold his valuables at the pawn shop in the attempt to get his life back on the right track. He naturally had it in him to work hard and use his intelligence to get what he wanted, and in the end, he got it. In fact, he may have even surmounted his original goal by a long shot.