

Lareau, Annette. Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life. Berkley: U of California P. 2003.

## **Parenting with Class**

Weekly I sit on the carpet in a kindergarten classroom. As a college freshman, I'm a mammoth compared to the rest of the students. I plop down in back so I don't obstruct anybody's view of the picture books. Usually, we undertake a writing activity after reading on the floor, and I often assist a certain boy—we'll call him James.<sup>1</sup> James has sharp eyes and very dark skin. Judging by what look like serious untreated dental issues, I imagine his family doesn't have a lot of money. This kid will *not* concentrate. Encouragement usually degenerates into pleading. One day, the session fell apart when he chomped the eraser clean off his pencil. The fact that he did it wasn't what especially irked me; it was that he lied to my face about doing it!

Kindergarteners are so different from one another in terms of maturity and academic level. They all have very little schooling so far, but I notice some can write sophisticated sentences, while James and others have not mastered the phonetics of the alphabet. Similarly, some children focus well and interact easily with adults, while others avoid eye contact and are constantly off task. These kids have just begun their academic lives, but they obviously come to the table with unequal abilities and skills. What can account for this?

With this question in mind, I picked up Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life, by Annette Lareau. Lareau is currently an associate professor of sociology at

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<sup>1</sup> "James" is a pseudonym.

Temple University. Unequal Childhoods is largely concerned with identifying “the largely invisible but powerful ways that parents’ social class impacts children’s life experience” (3). This is vital to understanding the position of children in educational institutions, a subject Lareau spends a great deal of time with. Her argument is fairly simple: the practices of raising children vary most dramatically by social class, and this has huge ramifications for kids in life outside of the home. Lareau identifies her sociological approach as a “categorical analysis,” one in which families are grouped (by employment and income) into the broad categories of middle-class, working-class, and poor (236).<sup>2</sup> This is in contrast to two other academic views of class. Lareau describes the first of these, the “American Dream” view of U.S. class stratification (in which the rich are rich because they are talented and hardworking, and the poor are poor because they are not) as naïve. The second alternative paradigm for class, a “graduated” view of class difference, describes inequality as “different threads...interwoven in an intricate and often baffling pattern.” The graduated view appears incorrect based on Lareau’s fieldwork, which does indeed show clear differences in parenting based on broad class groups.

Lareau’s thesis and categorical framework are both products of an exhaustive (and exhausting!) methodology. She and a handful of undergrad and graduate students spent two years observing twelve families: four middle-class, four working-class, four poor, with two white and two black families within each class group. The observation periods

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<sup>2</sup> “Middle-class children are those who live in households in which at least one parent is employed in a position that either entails substantial managerial authority or that centrally draws upon highly complex, educationally certified (i.e., college-level) skills. Working-class children are those who live in households in which neither parent is employed in a middle-class position and at least once parents is employed in a position with little or no managerial authority and that does not draw on highly complex, educationally certified skills. This category includes lower-level white collar workers. Poor children are those who live in households in which parents receive public assistance and do not participate in the labor force on a regular, continuous basis” (281, notes 1-3).

were intrusive and meticulously documented, designed to record all major aspects of family life. Researchers did everything with kids in a “tagging-along” fashion. They played basketball, watched TV, went to doctor appointments, ate meals, rode to soccer tournaments, documented sibling spats, even spent the night. Once families adjusted to their constant presence, the researchers carried tape recorders as they followed the families. Along with the twelve families selected for intensive observation, Lareau and her associates interviewed the parents of eighty-eight other children, with similar class and racial breakdowns. After sifting through copious amounts of data, Lareau found a striking correlation between parenting styles and social class. Specifically, middle-class parents raise children a certain way, while working-class and poor parents use a totally different strategy. Lareau calls the middle-class strategy “Concerted Cultivation,” and the working-class/poor strategy the “Accomplishment of Natural Growth.” Class is the main factor; Lareau notes that the “role of race was less powerful than I’d expected” (240).<sup>3</sup>

Unequal Childhoods is broken down into three parts. The first two focus on the most dramatic ways parental social class influences children. The third examines the ramifications of these differences in institutions outside the home. Lareau uses an effective strategy of spotlighting an individual family every chapter within these parts. Part I, “The Organization of Daily Life,” deals with the everyday pace of a child’s existence. There is a dramatic contrast between social classes in the amount of structured, adult-organized and led activities undertaken by children. Middle-class kids

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<sup>3</sup> In terms of child-rearing, Lareau found race to be a factor for the middle-class only. Since middle-class black children exist in a predominately white world in regard to institutions and activities, their parents are extremely sensitive to the possibility of racism. In keeping with the middle-class parenting strategy utilizing language (discussed below), these black parents make sure their children are alerted to the issue of race. They attempt to strike a delicate balance between alerting their kids to the possibility of racism, while not allowing racism to be an excuse for their children performing poorly in school or elsewhere. Black middle-class parents carefully monitor the racial makeup of school classrooms and activities. For instance, parents often ensure their black child is not the only child of color on an athletic team (121-122). Among the lower classes, race has practically no influence on the way parents raise their children.

play on organized soccer, baseball, and basketball teams, do gymnastics, take private music lessons, employ academic tutors, perform in school plays, and often interact with friends on organized “play dates.” Working-class and poor children have large amounts of unstructured time. They spend time both inside and outdoors, watching TV, playing video games, tromping around the neighborhood, initiating spontaneous play with other children of all ages, and generally engaging in activities of their own choosing that have no arbitrary time limits.

Part II, “Language Use,” focuses on how class difference affects speech. Middle-Class parents use language as its own end. They play word games with their kids, use negotiation and reason as the primary tools of interaction and behavior control, and constantly build the vocabularies of their children. Alternately, working-class and poor parents use language “as a practical conduit of daily life, not as a tool for cultivating reasoning skills or a resource to plumb for ways to express feelings or ideas” (146). The bourgeois talk incessantly to their kids. In the lower classes, “short remarks punctuate comfortable silences” (146).

These stark differences in daily life and the use of language between families of different classes reflect two distinct philosophical approaches to child-rearing. Lareau succinctly explains the difference between the Concerted Cultivation of the middle-class and the Accomplishment of Natural Growth of the lower classes: “Whereas middle-class children often are treated as a project to be developed, working-class and poor children are given boundaries for their behavior and then allowed to grow” (67). The observations in Parts I and II support this. Organized activities (Part I) are valued by middle-class parents because of the traits and skills they cultivate in children. When one father ticks off the benefits of competitive sports, he lists maturity, teamwork, and the ability to

buckle down when things get tough (60-62). Many activities accord other benefits, like the ability to perform in public, and adjusting kids to the concept of performance-based assessment (61-63). Parents reinforce these types of behaviors at home by coaching kids to interact assertively with adults, and preaching about the importance of personal responsibility (63). It's easy to see how all these qualities would aid children in institutions like school and the workplace. There are downsides to this pattern of daily life, and Lareau is always quick to point them out: middle-class siblings fight more, are exhausted from their activities, and are bored without constant stimulation (52-57). Children of the lower classes develop a different set of valuable skills. They are more relaxed than middle-class kids, more energetic, are rarely bored, have strong bonds with family, and are in control of their own leisure (102). Unfortunately, these skills are not valued by institutions, and therefore lower-class kids are at a disadvantage in school and elsewhere.

Language use (Part II) follows the same pattern. Parents of middle-class children engage in dialogue with their kids that emphasizes skills like summarization ("Tell me about your day") and highlighting important details ("What were your favorite parts of that movie?") (117). They "relied exclusively on language as their mechanism of behavioral control," reasoning and negotiating with their children and offering rationale for directives (128). Trivial matters are seen as opportunities for the development of skills like argumentation. In my favorite example, a father urges his son to provide textual support (from a comic book) to justify his claim about a certain X-Men character being the most powerful.<sup>4</sup> Again, the institutional benefits that come with a command of

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<sup>4</sup> "Terry [the father] urged Alex to defend his position as he suggested one X-Man was the more powerful than the other. Terry often asked, 'What do you mean? What episode did that happen in? Where did you read that?' The importance of structuring an argument and referring to written material is stressed. Alex [takes out and reads from] his *Secrets of the Marvel X-Men* book to prove to his Dad that Wolverine's claws

vocabulary and argumentative skill are obvious, especially in academics. And, again, working-class and poor kids have a different experience. Language is used by lower-class families as a means to an end. Limited talk and substantial body language is used to get points across (146). Kids don't talk back to their parents or converse with adults as equals, which includes not making eye contact during conversation (147,157). While this lack of emphasis on verbal prowess means lower-class parents are less drained by persiflage with their kids, it puts those kids at a serious institutional disadvantage. For instance, during visits to the doctor, lower-class kids and parents are often taciturn. This can be extremely frustrating for health care professionals, and often results in a lack of fluid information sharing between doctor and patient (157-158).

Part III, "Families and Institutions," goes deeper into the institutional problems that plague lower-class kids because of the way they're raised. I've alluded to these inequities above, but it's especially important to observe them in schools. If children are not on equal footing going *into* school, those disparities are likely to increase by the time they graduate. Lareau observes how Concerted Cultivation works to the academic advantage of middle-class kids. For one thing, adults who view Concerted Cultivation as their *role* as parents are likely to intervene on behalf of their kids whenever it will be beneficial. Lareau observed that these parents generally lobby hard for their kids in school, are in close contact with educators, and have no reservations about criticizing teachers whenever they deem it appropriate (176-177). Kids have a leg up academically when their vocabularies and reasoning skills are well developed, and when they are used to performing for a critical audience and working in teams toward a set goal. The situation is very different for working-class and poor schoolchildren. Their parents, 

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 were the only part of his body made of a 'titanium alloy'" (130).

because of social class position, often give deference to the “expertise” of educators (214). They respond to contacts from the school, but do not initiate them (*Ibid*). Their kids are not equipped with the same academic mindset and skills that are instilled into middle-class children. Lareau sums this up by declaring, “It is the specific ways that institutions function that ends up conveying advantages to middle-class children” (160).

It should be noted that Unequal Childhoods is a work of intensive scholarship.<sup>5</sup> The scope of the research is grand, and Lareau’s analysis is sensitive and nuanced. Lareau’s argument leaves no doubt that parenting tactics vary with social class, and that this variation has profound consequences for children, in and out of school.<sup>6</sup> She spends the entire book—minus one half of a chapter—convincing us of this. Then, finally, she tells us what needs to be done. For the middle-class: *relax*. Let kids have some free time so they’re not so haggard and can learn to cope with durations of unstructured time. Also, parents can over-do it with institutional intervention; give teachers some room to breathe. And don’t cultivate a child’s bantering ability to the extent that he or she whines incessantly or won’t ever obey directives (253-255). These recommendations are sincere, but niceties. I agree that middle-class parents and kids are often overworked, but this is trivial compared to the systemic problems faced by the lower classes in institutional life. It is in this aspect of Lareau’s scholarship that education reformers have their work cut out for them, and she only points them in the right direction. These readers will no doubt lament the fact that the subsection entitled “Gaining Compliance with Dominant

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<sup>5</sup> Aside from its academic and social value, readers will finish Unequal Childhoods with a radically new way of remembering and understanding the way they were raised themselves, and/or how they’ve raised their own children. Lareau’s analysis often prompts thoughts like, “Wow, I remember my parents doing/saying stuff like that.”

<sup>6</sup> Lareau also devotes space to the *reasons* for the differences in parenting strategies across social classes. Space does not permit a full discussion here, but Lareau sees two components of social class affecting how parents raise their kids: worldview and economic/educational resources (214-215).

Standards: Implications for Working-Class and Poor Families” takes up less than two pages of her conclusion. It does offer good suggestions: parents should read to their kids, take an active role in their children’s school, and stress vocabulary development and reasoning skills at home (254-255). Educators should “teach kids to ‘code-switch’ as they move between home and encounters with institutions” (255). How should we make these changes? Lareau cites the relative success of “programs that offer to working-class and poor children the kinds of concerted cultivation middle-class children get at home” (*Ibid*). These programs are ultimately compensatory; they try to correct after the fact, rather than before. This raises a thorny ethical issue for those interested in education reform, one Lareau obviously struggles with.

The big question is ultimately one of relativism. Are we willing to embrace all forms of parenting, without qualification, regardless of the outcomes? Lareau states upfront that she’s going to be rough on middle-class parenting methods (11). She clearly wants to paint a balanced picture that notes the drawbacks of Concerted Cultivation while listing the strengths of Natural Growth. She uses hyperbolic language to describe Concerted Cultivation’s weak points, but often fails to account for such strong language (132). I was often unconvinced when the only “significant costs” she could marshal were that middle-class parents and kids were often tired, and that kids were sometimes mouthy. When discussing Natural Growth, she uses language that downplays the costs. She correctly observes that “when children and parents move outside the home into the world of social institutions, they find that...cultural practices are not given equal value” (237). But is this surprising? More importantly, is it *right*?

I would argue that it often is right. There are skills that *should* be valued more highly in schools, like the ability to buckle down, interact with adults, construct

compelling arguments, and summarize information. In fairness, Lareau keenly understands instances where Concerted Cultivation has an *unfair* advantage. For instance, when educators blame problems that are partly due to public education bureaucracy on insufficient parental involvement, Concerted Cultivation is being promoted by institutions to cover up for their own failings (210-211). But let's be honest. Lareau is a member of the middle-class, and endorses Concerted Cultivation. She doesn't state this directly, but makes her opinion clear anyway. This is an example from Lareau's personal field notes. Katie is a poor child, enacting a skit with her cousin Amy:

Katie pretends to be a child coming to Santa. Amy [Santa] sits in the chair and receives her...Grandmom does not seem at all interested in the skit... Just as the skit is beginning to gather momentum, Amy's father comes into the room...Amy announces firmly, "That is the end of part one." *I smile and say, "Good job!"* The girls regroup, plot out part two, come into the living room, and present that installment. *Again, their grandmother offers the girls only the slightest acknowledgement, and [the father] continues to completely ignore his niece and daughter* (99, emphasis added).

Here, Lareau reveals her instinct to nurture creativity versus the poor parents' disinclination to do anything of the sort. And this would fit with her honesty about inherent difficulties in the study:

It is one thing to believe, intellectually, as many do, that child-rearing practices are historically specific and that it is a mistake to valorize the practices of the middle class. It is quite another thing to be in the same intimate space with family members when different practices exist. (In some ways, it is comparable to the difference between being aware that automobile accidents and heart attacks happen all the time and actually being an eyewitness to one.) (272)

Lareau's comparison to car accidents and heart attacks is revealing. We don't make value judgments about tragedies like these; nobody refers to a naturally occurring illness as "wrong." But when faced with a co-worker or loved one clutching his chest in pain, our neutrality dissipates. The heart attack is analogous to parenting techniques many (including Lareau and myself) would be uncomfortable with, like corporal punishment, or ignoring a child's desire for attention from her parents. Unfortunately, this candid passage is tucked at the end of Appendix A, as opposed to somewhere prominent.

Lareau's reservations about making a value judgment on parenting strategies may be appropriate for academia, but it limits her ability to suggest practical fixes to these problems of institutional inequality. She praises programs that attempt to concertedly cultivate after the fact, but is unable to recommend strategies for changing the ways working-class and poor parents raise children. She's correct that child-rearing practices are historically specific, but that doesn't mean they are all equal. Reformers who want to see institutional experiences improve for the lower classes must come up with strategies that actually address the problems inherent in Natural Growth methods, while remaining true to progressive values. For instance, the middle-class often responds to changes in professional opinion very quickly, and parenting techniques are no exception (5). Might there be a way to unobtrusively disseminate this information to a broader audience? Educators and activists could lobby communities, being explicit about the skills children need to succeed in school, and emphasizing that parents themselves (not teachers) are best suited to cultivate these skills. After all, kids are language sponges when they're young. If a child waits till school to develop certain language skills, it may be too late to catch up.<sup>7</sup> I'm not advocating for the lower-class to completely overhaul their strategies for

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<sup>7</sup> The reader might wonder why I focus disproportionately on the "Language Use" topic and seem to neglect "The Organization of Daily Life" in my discussion of possibilities for reform. There are two reasons for

raising children. There are many benefits to Natural Growth. But there needs to be a way to incorporate the best from both philosophies, so lower-class kids will not start school at an enormous disadvantage.

Returning to where we began, with James, I believe Lareau explained the roots of my frustrating situation. (James, you'll recall, lied about eating an eraser right in front of me, and looked shocked when I called him on it.) Often, as a part of Natural Growth, parents do not respond to wild exaggerations by their children. Lareau cites an example of a boy who calls his teacher a liar in front of his mom. The mother doesn't follow up by asking her son to defend his accusation. She simply "listens quietly and reminds him of a teacher she did like, but...does not have her son elaborate" (139). If this can be applied to James's case, he may have similar experiences. If he is accustomed to being unchallenged for minor transgressions, his shock at my rebuttal would be understandable.

Annette Lareau has written a fascinating study on the way parents in different social classes raise their children, and the effects of these differences on their children in institutional life. This topic should be of particular interest to scholars, activists, teachers, parents, and students interested in public education reform. There's work to be done on both sides of the school-home equation. Teachers need to recognize the different sets of skills and experiences their students come to class with, and parents need to reevaluate the way they raise their kids (that goes for the middle-class, too). Lareau's scholarship is vital to understanding the problem of class inequality as it relates to our schools; reformers need to decide what to do about it.

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this. First, language skills have a more direct bearing on school and academics, which is our focus. Second, most activities in the daily lives of middle-class kids are expensive, and require a middle-class budget to undertake. The aspirations for closing the gap between rich and poor are beyond the scope of this review.

**-Ben Larson**