

## Book Review

### UNEQUAL CHILDHOODS: CLASS, RACE, AND FAMILY LIFE

by Annette Lareau.

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. 331 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), \$21.95 (paper).

*Unequal Childhoods*. Annette Lareau's provocative 2003 ethnography takes us inside daily family life in nine White and Black homes to illustrate once again why class matters for children's socialization and life chances. Like her groundbreaking study *Home Advantage: Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education* (1989) and other ethnographies of class culture, such as Willis' *Learning to Labor* (1977) and MacLeod's *Ain't No Makin' It* (1987), *Unequal Childhoods* is an absorbing empirical test of social reproduction theory and a critique of educational inequality. This book is less theoretical and less explicitly concerned with life in schools than Lareau's earlier work; it focuses instead on "capturing moments of reproduction" through meticulous documentation of the use of leisure time, language, and kin relations in middle-class versus poor and working-class homes. Lareau shows how these routine practices, and the implicit beliefs that underlie them, provide children with distinct advantages and disadvantages for negotiating social institutions like school. "It turns out that the family into which we are born, an event over which we have no control, matters quite a lot," she concludes. "It matters in part because the system of institutions is selective, building on some cultures more than others" (p. 256).

Lareau's work is well known to sociologists of education for building on and refining the cultural capital theory of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in an American context. In *Home Advantage*, she illustrates how White parents with differing cultural and social capital respond differently to school expectations for parent involvement. Parents with high socioeconomic status (SES) deploy their higher educational competence, occupational status, and broader social networks to actively supervise and intervene in their children's schooling, thus "customizing" their education. By contrast, low-SES parents who have fewer resources defer to educators and monitor schooling from a distance, resulting in a "generic" education for their children. Lareau stresses that it is not social class alone that confers a "home advantage" for high-SES

families, but also the school's privileging of middle-class culture and the strategies individual parents use to activate their cultural capital (Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Lareau, 1987, 1989). Class position combined with institutional privilege lead to "moments of social inclusion" for some or "moments of social exclusion" for others, according to how well positioned families are to respond to school demands (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). *Unequal Childhoods* extends on these key concerns with class and privilege in social institutions from a new angle, delving into the roots and practices of class culture in family life.

The book's most original contribution is its development of the concepts of "concerted cultivation" versus "the accomplishment of natural growth" as contrasting "cultural logics" for childrearing. Lareau suggests that middle-class parents' propensity for eliciting their children's interests, orchestrating their activities, and promoting their vocabulary and reasoning skills amounts to the concerted cultivation of children's talents. By contrast, poor and working-class parents focus on providing for their children's basic needs, safety, and discipline while allowing them to play informally on their own with neighbors and relatives, which facilitates the accomplishment of natural growth. Lareau foreshadows these ideas in two introductory chapters that make the fundamentals of inequality and social structure accessible to general readers and highlight class-based childrearing differences in a useful typology. She then illustrates these differences in nine family portraits grouped around three themes: the organization of daily life (three families), the use of language (two families), and interactions with institutions (four families).

Lareau brings to this study her trademark style of in-depth immersion in naturalistic research in students' homes, which greatly enhances the credibility of her findings. Data for the family portraits are drawn mainly from sixty hours of participant observation over a period of three weeks in each home, and 90–120-minute interviews with each parent. Most target children in the purposeful sample of twelve families were in third and fourth grade at two public elementary schools (one poor and working class with a mix of White and Black students, and one largely White and affluent) in a large northeastern metropolitan area.

Applied to Bourdieu's theory, concerted cultivation and natural growth represent divergent forms of family habitus, the "system of structured, structuring dispositions" for what is deemed comfortable and natural, as well as desirable and possible, for "people like us" (Bourdieu, 1990). Family practices socialize children into the taken-for-granted habitus of concerted cultivation or the accomplishment of natural growth, which take on different exchange values as cultural capital in social institutions. Where Lareau's previous work stressed the activation of cultural capital (Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Lareau, 1989; Lareau & Horvat, 1999), *Unequal Childhoods* takes on the more subtle, daunting task of unraveling the transmission of habitus within the family. As in her earlier work, Lareau is adept at tempering social structural determinism with individual agency, showing how class-based cultural beliefs stem from an

"interweaving of life experiences and resources, including parents' economic resources, occupational conditions, and educational backgrounds" (p. 250). With this book's focus on telling families' stories, however, Lareau relegates discussion of Bourdieu to a short appendix. This may leave her admirers hoping for more theoretical discussion and detailed sociological analysis of the study's findings in future work.

Like Lareau's work on parent involvement, *Unequal Childhoods* challenges common assumptions about good parenting, depicting them as the product of the dominant culture of their time. "Every method of raising children is historically specific and subject to change," Lareau reminds us. Furthermore, she writes, "concerted cultivation is neither 'the only' way nor 'the right' way to raise children" (p. 173). Rather, it arose in recent years from middle-class parents embracing the advice of child psychologists and other experts to foster their children's talents to promote healthy development and academic success. A crowded calendar of sports practices, music lessons, choir rehearsals, and religion classes is the center of family life for the four middle-class families in the study; children's time is hectic, structured, and mostly arranged and spent with adults. The upper-middle-class African American Williams family, with its heavy schedule of enrichment activities and constant stream of sophisticated conversation, epitomizes the "school-like home" environment that is associated with strong parent involvement and student achievement (Epstein, 1990). Experienced in sparring with his lawyer father and prompted by his assertive mother, young Alexander Williams is emboldened to question the family doctor — an act alien to his low-SES peers. Similarly, White upper-middle-class Garrett Tallinger has learned from his many sports coaches how to look adults in the eye and shake their hands, practicing skills that will serve him well in the workplace. Lives revolving around organized activities, which require considerable outlays of family money and time, lead middle-class children to feel entitled to adult attention and comfortable in the company of adults. Lareau finds that, along with children's exhaustion and stress, adult domination of children's lives and children's defiance of adult authority are dubious offshoots of this approach. In her concern for these risks of concerted cultivation, Lareau adds her voice and new data to debates in psychology, sociology, and the popular press about the overscheduled "hurried child" (Elkind, 1981) and the increasing rationalization and efficiency of family life (Hays, 1996; Ritzer, 2000).

In Lareau's more open-ended concept of the accomplishment of natural growth, on the other hand, children are granted "an autonomous world, apart from adults, in which they are free to try out new experiences and develop important social competencies" (p. 67), such as managing their time and negotiating conflict with peers. Lareau portrays the virtues of a simpler life "at a child's pace," free of adult scheduling or control, for the working-class Black children in the Taylor family, who enjoy a lot of free time, imaginative outdoor play, freedom of movement, and close ties with relatives. She acknowledges

the pervasive presence of the television in these households but does not find it problematic, since children often abandon it for playmates. Yet benign neglect as a childrearing strategy does not appear so benign in the Brindle family, where Katie's poor, White, single mother and grandmother are too preoccupied with family troubles to watch or take part in her impromptu skits — an interest that middle-class parents might reward with attention and drama lessons. Similarly, talk is more sporadic in the study's working-class and poor homes, with a restricted linguistic code serving as "a practical conduit of daily life" rather than an expressive or analytical vehicle: adults speak to children in simple directives and children are expected to obey. The overall effect on children is a "sense of constraint" and discomfort in the presence of adults.

What do these divergent cultural logics mean for children's life chances in school, work, and other social institutions? Lareau convincingly demonstrates the "invisible" advantage middle-class families derive from the cultural continuity between home and school, centered on the shared value of concerted cultivation. For example, in class discussions and responses to student journals, teachers display more interest in and approval of children who describe participation in soccer tournaments and dance recitals rather than informal play and watching television. Similarly, school tasks privilege middle-class children whose parents have promoted their vocabulary development, powers of reasoning, and general knowledge through extensive talk, explanation, and negotiation. Teachers expect parents to stimulate children's language development, encourage their interests, and monitor their homework, as these parents do. However, middle-class parents model a sense of entitlement in relations with institutions, which can lead to conflict. These parents feel they have the right to criticize schools, oversee teachers, and intervene on matters great and trivial. Middle-class parents like Ms. Marshall do not hesitate to call the school or district office when they perceive a problem, and they implicitly train their children to do likewise. As in *Home Advantage*, the result of parental intervention at school is the obtaining of privilege, such as special study materials from the teacher to help a struggling student or placement in gifted classes despite missing the cutoff test score. The home advantage is "invisible" in that all parties appear to be operating on taken-for-granted assumptions about childrearing; neither middle-class parents nor educators are aware of a shared philosophy of concerted cultivation guiding actions that privilege some children over others.

Poor and working-class families are positioned quite differently in relation to schools in Lareau's account. There is a cultural mismatch between their *laissez-faire* approach to child development and the expectations of the school. For example, in the White, working-class Driver family, though her daughter is three years behind in reading, Ms. Driver is content to let the school handle the inept, much delayed procedure for special education testing and placement. She complies with the school's requests but takes no initiative and asks no questions. Like other lower-SES parents, this mother can be

assertive with her landlord or local shopkeepers but becomes deferential and clearly uncomfortable with school officials. "I don't want to jump into anything and find out that it's the wrong thing," she explains (p. 198). Another White, working-class mother reveals her intimidation and frustration after a parent-teacher conference when she says, "I didn't get to talk about the thing that I want to talk about. . . . I'm not very professional. I can't use the words I want to use. Just because they [teachers] are professional doesn't mean that they are so smart" (p. 228).

Class-based contrasts for families in schools are mirrored in other institutional settings observed by the researchers. Rich data from family visits to medical offices reinforce the portrayal of middle-class parents (and their children) as informed, empowered consumers who ask questions and assert their rights, as opposed to poor and working-class parents (and their children) who appear as passive, somewhat resentful clients who cannot understand specialists' jargon or express their needs. Although the church figured prominently in many of these families' lives, including children's activities across class lines, it was unfortunately not discussed as a site of institutional interactions.

The most dramatic examples of discontinuity between the cultural logic of lower-SES homes and schools concerns the use of physical force, whether exerted by children socialized to "fight back" on the playground or by parents using corporal punishment at home. These practices clash with school norms of negotiated conflict resolution and the legal obligation to report suspected child abuse. Lareau shows how this leads poor and working-class families to fear the school because of its power to turn them in to authorities and take their children away — an undeniable source of alienation noted in other studies (e.g., Reese, Balzano, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 1995; Valdés, 1996). In one of her most vivid chapters, Lareau describes the White, working-class Yanellis, who believe their unruly son needs regular beatings and are pleased when he fights back at school, even though when he does he is suspended. School staff, insisting that these parents are "giving him the wrong message," attack the Yanelli's parenting style. The parents' "failure to use elaborate reasoning (a cultural practice) was transformed into a lack of resources when they confronted school authorities," Lareau suggests (p. 230). In an appendix, she notes that she is accustomed from her upbringing to yelling and physical discipline — an orientation that may explain her special sensitivity to this issue.

With her closely observed depiction of how concerted cultivation and natural growth play out in daily family life, Lareau offers sociologists a brilliant empirical account of the transmission of class culture and its consequences for children's futures. Though her insights on language differences only confirm the landmark work of scholars like Bernstein (1971) and Heath (1983), language is but one strand that is integrated into an original, holistic account. Lareau's portrayal of cultural logic also sheds new light on literature in the sociology of education, particularly on parents' roles in education and home-

school relations. Lareau mines the routines and language of daily life to reveal the underlying reasons that some children end up with a “customized” education and others with a “generic” one (Lareau, 1989). *Unequal Childhoods* helps to clarify studies on the propensity of higher-SES parents to manage their childrens’ careers and exert power in the school arena (Baker & Stevenson, 1986; McDonough, 1997; Useem, 1992; Wells & Serna, 1996; Yonezawa, 1997) and the tendency of lower-SES parents to provide less instrumental, more indirect support for schooling and to experience alienation and confusion in encounters with schools (Fine, 1991; Fordham, 1996; Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996; Valdés, 1996). Although Lareau’s ethnography was part of a larger study of eighty-eight children that included extensive classroom observations and teacher interviews, school data is used relatively sparingly. More capsule portraits of children as students, embedded in the chapters or summarized in the appendix, would have been a welcome addition for readers in education.

With her professed categorical rather than gradational approach to class, Lareau is more captivated by between-group class differences than within-group variations that blur distinctions between social classes. Other ethnographic studies of family socialization for schooling concerned with inequality have found within-group differences that imply more fluidity across class lines (see, e.g., Auerbach, 2001; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Gonzalez, 1996; Jones, 1999). In particular, they suggest that some poor and working-class families have access to strategies and beliefs more typically associated with the middle class. For example, Clark’s (1983) classic study of low-income Black families in the inner city found that the mothers of successful students promoted the “sponsored independence” of the student role through deliberate home pedagogy and monitoring. Similarly, Gándara’s (1995) retrospective study of the socialization and education of fifty highly successful Chicano/a adults makes a case for “middle-class cultural capital” in poor, immigrant families that helped students do well, for example, by encouraging reading books in the home and having dinner conversations about current events.

In her zeal to show how much class matters, Lareau may have stressed the extremes at the expense of elucidating the broad (though shrinking) “middle” of the middle-class. Families in the study range from two on public assistance to one making more than \$200,000 per year. Lareau explains how, with a small sample, she defined class broadly according to the relative degree of authority and use of complex, educationally credentialed skills that parents had in their jobs, with middle-class jobs having greater managerial authority or drawing on highly complex, college-level skills (p. 279). She justifies combining upper-middle-class and middle-class families in one category and poor and working-class families in another due to similarities in their childrearing techniques. However, the four middle-class families’ incomes were high during the 1994–1995 fieldwork period, ranging from \$85,000 to over \$200,000, with three of the four having incomes over \$100,000. According to the U.S.

Census (2000), only about 12 percent of U.S. families had incomes between \$100,000 and \$200,000 in 1999; the median American family income was \$50,046. Since the top income of the working-class families in the book was about \$40,000, it would appear that no family in the study was middle income. I suspect that there are important differences of degree between the upper-middle-class and wealthy families in the book and middle-income families in terms of the number and cost of children's activities, the level of the elaborated linguistic code parents use with their children, and the extent to which parents intervene in their children's education — all key elements of Lareau's thesis. While focusing on the high end of the middle-class allows for an instructive contrast with poor and working-class parents, it risks misrepresenting the middle. Perhaps a more helpful description of the contrast is between families of high and low socioeconomic status.

Though Lareau features race along with class in the book's title and took care to construct a racially balanced sample, she treats race as a matter of far less consequence than class. To Lareau's credit, she sketches the color of children's worlds in each family portrait, noting the extent of integration or segregation children experience in their neighborhoods, schools, churches, and peer groups. Black middle-class parents, whose children tend to live in predominantly White worlds, are vigilant about monitoring subtle forms of racial exclusion or stereotyping as they inculcate racial pride. Despite this attention to racial socialization and her expectation of finding major racial divides, Lareau concludes that African American children have more in common with their class peers than with Black children of another class. Ultimately, class matters more than race for the links between family habitus and institutions that are the focus of the book. Lareau also notes gender variation within classes, as with poor and working-class girls' more restricted range of permissible movement in the neighborhood compared to boys', but she does not deem these differences significant. Would the same conclusions about race and gender apply in a comparative study of class with other groups, such as U.S.-born and immigrant Latinos and Asian Americans? These would be important test cases for Lareau's thesis.

As in *Home Advantage*, Lareau treats readers to a methodological appendix that offers an insider's view of the logistics and dilemmas of ethnographic fieldwork, ranging from what she and her colleagues brought to initial parent interviews (bakery pie) to their policy on intervening in the lives of the families they were observing (only in cases of blood or imminent threat). Her methodological explanations and rationales, offered with disarming frankness, strengthen her findings. For example, the acknowledged positionality of the author and her research assistants as nonparents allows them to delve into the intricacies of childrearing as into an exotic, alien culture, noting the tremendous work that goes into all parenting. Lareau and her team are surprised by routines middle-class parents take for granted, such as the need to take younger children to older siblings' activities or to arrange summer alterna-

tives to TV and video games. This has the virtue of making the familiar strange and the strange familiar, in keeping with the ethnographer's mission. As a middle-class parent, I found the critique of my tribe's approach to child-rearing harsh at times, though generally intriguing in its toppling of assumptions and its account of the socialization of entitlement.

Despite the reservations noted above, *Unequal Childhoods* is an exemplary, accessible illustration of social reproduction that should interest students and scholars of sociology, sociology/anthropology of education, child development, home-school relations, and ethnographic research, as well as parents and educators. In the end, Lareau's insistence that class matters sweeps the reader in with its power. In her conclusion, she argues passionately that, rather than assume we live in an open society where individuals can be justly blamed for their circumstances, we must confront divisions and "enlarge our truncated vocabulary about the importance of social class" (p. 257). Lareau is a master of this lexicon, an eloquent native speaker of a language most Americans are reluctant to speak, using her work to break the silence and enrich the discourse. It seems likely that, with *Unequal Childhoods* following *Home Advantage*, Lareau will gain the distinction of having produced not one but two classic studies that should be required reading for all those concerned about educational inequality.

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