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Melvyn L. Fein

Kennesaw State University, mfein@kennesaw.edu

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Book Review

**Unequal Childhoods:
Class, Race, and Family Life**

By Annette Lareau

Reviewer: Melvyn L. Fein

I recently read Annette Lareau's 2003 monograph Unequal Childhoods and it broke my heart. An unusually good ethnography about social class socialization, it also demonstrates with excruciating clarity what has gone wrong with contemporary social theory. Despite having achieved broad influence in a very short period, this work illustrates why sociology has become less, rather than more, scientific.

A genuine science is cumulative. The discoveries of one generation provide a foundation upon which the next builds. A genuine science also eschews ideology. Instead of uncritically accepting moralistic premises, it attempts to be empirical rather than reflexively prescriptive. The tragedy of Lareau's work is that notwithstanding its excellent observations, these are corrupted by pre-existing philosophical commitments.

The primary question addressed in this monograph is: Is there a social class difference in how children are raised? The answer is resoundingly and convincingly, "Yes." Upper middle class children are treated quite differently by their parents than working or lower class children are by theirs. The former, as Lareau amply demonstrates, lead far more organized lives. Once home from school, theirs is world of constant motion. They are regularly shepherded from one extra-curricular activity to another.

Their less fortunate peers, in contrast, are left largely on their own. Rather than being subjected to regular adult supervision, they are allowed to organize their own time. This generally means going out to play with friends and relatives in a catch-as-catch-can manner.

Similarly, upper middle class children have recurring conversations with their parents. These adults are genuinely interested in their achievements. Moreover, adult

subject matter is routinely shared with the young. Not only are they thereby exposed to broader adult vocabularies, but they are explicitly instructed about subjects thought to be useful. Meanwhile, their less affluent peers are either left to fend for themselves or periodically exposed to crude—and sometimes—angry dismissal.

Not surprisingly, middle class children do better at school. One is also left with the impression that they will do better later on as well. All of this distresses Lareau. As a decent human being, one who is obviously sympathetic to her subjects, she wonders why this is so, and furthermore what can be done to improve the prospects of the downtrodden.

It is with her answers, not her ethnography, that I must quibble. These are distressingly pedestrian and stereotypically sociological. The very title of her book suggests where she is headed. Merely alluding to “unequal” childhoods implies that she would like to make them more equal.

It turns out that her primary theoretical influence is Pierre Bourdieu. She strongly approves of his notion that higher status children benefit from “cultural capital” that is withheld from those of lower status. Her answer is, therefore, to give the former less of this valuable commodity and the latter more.

What is left out of this equation is why the initial imbalance occurs. And here is where sociological precedent is blatantly ignored. In particular, Lareau is aware of the work of Melvin Kohn, but does not bring it to bear on her subject matter. She merely notes that “others” have “shown that parents occupations and working conditions...influence important aspects of their child-rearing beliefs” (p249). She does not even mention Kohn’s distinction between *self-direction* and *conformity* as the reason for differences in these practices.

As Kohn notes, upper middle class parents typically have jobs that require them to make independent decisions. Consequently, they realize that if their children are to get ahead, they too must be capable of competent decision-making. This is why they expend so much effort in encouraging self-direction.

Working class parents, in contrast, hold jobs where others tell them what to do. They are then expected to conform with these demands. Once they get home, however, they intend to be the boss. It is now their children who are required to be obedient. Needless to say this does not encourage decision-making abilities that might later facilitate social mobility.

The connection that Lareau does not make is how scheduling children for a variety of structured activities promotes self-direction. Indeed, on the face of it, it would seem that children left to their own devices would acquire greater practice making independent decisions. The reverse, however, seems to be true.

First, having to juggle a variety of structured activities encourages self-control. It turns out that personal discipline is the starting point for exercising independent judgment. Those who do not possess the internal controls to mull over potential choices are apt to be dangerously impulsive. They do what feels comfortable as opposed to that which has been carefully considered. In other words, they are liable to make bad choices.

Second, structured activities expose a child to a larger range of experiences. They get to deal with a larger number of people in more varied circumstances. As a result, they are apt to develop greater people skills. Moreover, people skills turn out to be crucial when supervising the work of others.

Third, organized activities provide a model of how to organize activities. And self-direction is dependent upon an ability to plan and organize. Those who do not learn how to foresee potential conflicts or to integrate disparate challenges are apt to be overwhelmed by complex techno-commercial activities.

Fourth, the various projects to which middle class children are exposed provide numerous teachable moments. Middle class parents do more than talk to their children. They patiently instruct them as to what to expect and how to overcome difficulties. In other words, they provide models on how to make competent decisions and information on doing so that will prove useful down the line.

Lareau does not appear to appreciate these sources of cultural capital. She seems to think of organizational abilities as fungible; i.e., that they can be lifted from some

children and awarded to others. According to her, “state intervention would probably be the most direct and effective way to reduce the kinds of social inequality described in this book” (p252).

Lareau would simply force middle class parents to stop “over-scheduling” their children, while she compelling working class parents to do more scheduling. She would also transfer resources from the more affluent to the less affluent.

All of this totally disregards the realities of parenting and class-related occupations. Like it or not, parents who are self-directed are more likely to promote self-direction, whereas those who are not probably will not. Moreover, anyone who believes the government can by fiat alter this disparity is deluded. A cursory survey of American education demonstrates as much.

Were Lareau more sensitive to the implications of earlier research, she too might have recognized this. Were she less captivated by ideological commitments, she might have been more scientifically sophisticated. This is a shame because her work is otherwise quite superior.