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EAD830
Book Review

Annette Lareau's *Unequal Childhoods* Book Reflection

Question: *'Is it possible to disentangle race and class, or are the two inherently entwined?'*

In the 1960s, America's national objective was the 'War on Poverty,' with education a core element in the fight to level economic inequality. Yet according to Kantor and Lowe (2013), this effort has largely been unsuccessful, for various reasons: from the failure to enact other policies that would more directly affect poverty to reactionary pushback and legal reversals to a more 'corporate' approach to education (Kantor & Lowe, 2013, pp.25, 31, 35). As a result, not only do academic achievement gaps still exist, but also economic inequalities continue to widen. This achievement gap is actually an opportunity gap with its roots in socioeconomic status (SES), causing children to come to school at different starting points, facing different challenges, and with a learning gap that is distressingly difficult to eradicate later in schooling (Rothstein, 2013, p.62-64; Barnett & Lamy, 2013, p.101).

Lareau's premise was that differences in children's life opportunities result from class and upbringing, and are attributable to the different parenting styles employed between families from the middle class and lower/poor SES families. Middle class 'concerted cultivation' better equips children from these families to meet cultural standards imposed by the education system and society at large, and as a result, "...has profound implications for their children's life chances...Many studies demonstrate the crucial role of educational success in determining occupational success (Lareau, 2011,

p.29). Conversely, poor and working class families, who practice 'natural growth,' are at a disadvantage in school and after.

In an earlier work, Lareau (2002) had observed that "Race had *much less impact* than social class (italics added)" on children's life chances (Lareau, 2002, p.747), and in *Unequal Childhoods* pointed out that "...there were a few indications that if parents' economic and social resources were to change, their cultural practices would shift as well." (p. 252) Logically, it follows that class and economic circumstances, much more than race, influence parenting styles that are chosen and hence children's ultimate future trajectory. Therefore, if class is the source of disparities in children's education and opportunities, then closing socioeconomic gaps should return as the priority in our national debate and political agenda. But is it even possible to disentangle race and class in America, as Carter and Welner (2013) observed, "Class matters, as does race – and the two have long been inextricably linked" (Carter & Welner, 2013, p.219)?

Coming into this class, I felt very strongly that the achievement gap was a class issue, that 'race' was used because it would naturally garner more attention and was a far simpler explanation. In this, I had identified very strongly with Lareau, whom I was first exposed to in EAD822 (Diverse Students and Families.) Rothstein (2013) again seemed to confirm the idea of SES as the main culprit in educational achievement gaps, for reasons including health, housing, parental education, childrearing, and learning opportunities, all of which have the effect of "concentrating disadvantage" (Rothstein, 2013, p.62-64).

However, as most of the readings in this class have made clear, historical, racially based policies and behaviors have created a system of inequality in America. One cannot

dismiss the preponderance of evidence that those who face the greatest consequences of their economic circumstances – whether it be in housing, health, security, family and social environment and who also fall largely in Black and Hispanic (and not to forget 1st generation Asian) populations – and say its just a race issue (Rothstein & Wilder, 2007; Rich, Cox, & Bloch, 2016). This is why it is so difficult to disentangle race and class – as Welner and Carter (2013) stated, “Educational disparities and intergenerational economic inequality are highly correlated with skin color, ethnicity, linguistic and social class status.” (Welner & Carter, 2013, p.1) Our book group discussion also pointed to Lareau’s (2002) earlier observations that, as middle class black children grow older and have more complex societal interactions, the “relative importance of race in the children’s lives” increases, a clear indication that ‘life’s chances’ were not just about class upbringing (Lareau, 2002, pp.773-4).

From the beginning of this course, I had a pretty clear idea that what really exists is an opportunity gap; that its socioeconomic in origin; and while there are certainly racial components to this, its ultimately about class (and I recall that I said so in the introductory online group conversation.) But race does play a profound role in the educational achievement gap, and while I am still a supporter of both more choice and market based education solutions and believe in education as a means to rectify economic inequalities, I also have a greater recognition that intervention and oversight is necessary in order to ensure equitable opportunities are available for all.

References

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