

Class Differences in Parents' Information And Intervention in the Lives of Young Adults

Chapter Thirteen

Annette Lareau. 2012. *Unequal Childhoods*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Young workers in a global economy

- The children in *Unequal Childhoods* **came of age in unsettled economic times**: had they been born decades earlier, when the United States had a strong manufacturing economy, job prospects for those with a high school diploma (especially young men) would have been much brighter.
- As economies have become global, the **United States has lost many such jobs** to workers in other countries, and the supply of “good jobs” (with high wages, benefits, etc.) is dwindling while the number of “bad jobs” (service, retail, *low wage*) continues to grow.
- **Good jobs are tied to high levels of education**: for every \$1,000 earned by an individual with a B.A., someone with a high school diploma earns about \$600 (U.S. Census Bureau, “Educational Achievement”); as such, *schools are a critical sorting agent for the competitive workforce*

What has happened since graduation?

- While being middle-class did not shield youths from broken hearts or dashed athletic dreams, **the importance of social class did persist:**
 - *Applying to college was a family affair among the middle class, whereas working-class or poor youth depended on school personnel to help them.*
 - **Working-class and poor families experienced more heartbreak,** generally unable to prevent their children from being derailed from the higher education trajectory, while middle-class parents' interventions yielded cumulative advantages.
 - Patterns of concerted cultivation and the accomplishment of natural growth **continued as children grew older.**

Garrett Tallinger (white, middle-class)

(College life, athletics, uncertain but not nervous)

- Garrett *attends Villanova University* (a small Catholic school in the northeast), which provided him a *four-year basketball scholarship*.
- Soccer and basketball dominated much of Garrett's childhood.
- Garrett *continued to excel academically*, and took several AP and honors-level courses at his parents' urging.
- Garrett took the SATs twice, ultimately receiving a "mix and match" of 1090 [1640].
- Garrett could have played basketball at Yale or Brown, but neither provides athletic scholarships and the tuition alone would have been extremely expensive.
- At Villanova, Garrett has accumulated significant playing time and has done well academically.
- Garrett's *plans for the future are uncertain*; he chose a business major and hopes to marry and raise a family, but *plans to play basketball for several years after college first*.

Alexander Williams (African American, middle-class)

(Future looks bright)

- Alexander is home for the summer **volunteering in the offices of two different local physicians**; his mother helped with the arrangements.
- Alexander attends a special **eight-year combined undergraduate and medical school program at Columbia**, which he got in to “early decision.” He loves it.
- Alex earned almost all As in high school and got a combined SAT score of 1350 [2030].
- He reports receiving Bs in nearly all of his college classes; he feels he could have done better, but that he studied hard and enjoyed himself.
- Alex mentions that the transition to college **has been difficult for some of his African American peers, who experienced “shell shock” coming to a predominantly white school**; he also reports that he is **occasionally followed around in stores**.
- Alex is **content and optimistic about the future**; he receives money from his parents and is excited about an upcoming trip to California to visit his girlfriend.

Wendy Driver (white, working-class)

(adjusted ambitions?)

- Mother at 18 yrs. Now 20, Wendy has an 18-month-old daughter, Clara, and a soon-to-be born son; she became pregnant the fall following her high school graduation and, as a Catholic, did not consider abortion.
- Wendy's husband, Ryan, is in the Navy; his submarine job keeps him at sea six months at a time. When Ryan is gone, Wendy and Clara spend as much time at her parents' house (four hours away) as possible.
- Wendy attended St. Mary's, a Catholic high school where she thrived socially but continued to struggle academically. Wendy's friends pitched in to help her and her teachers accommodated by giving her oral (rather than written) exams; her high school graduation was a huge accomplishment.
- Although she was admitted to a small Catholic college, she decided not to attend, fearing she would be unable to do college-level work.
- Wendy likes being a stay-at-home mom, though she also hopes to "take night classes" someday and earn an early childhood education degree; her goal is to have a home-based day care business.

Tyrec Taylor (African American, working-class)

(Adjusted expectations)

- Tyrec attended three different high schools. His mother helped him apply to a respected charter school, where he was accepted and did well academically, but he missed his friends and longed to play basketball, so he transferred to Lower Richmond High.
- After his transfer, he passed only three courses and “got locked up” because he was “running with the wrong people”; he was released and moved in with his father.
- Ms. Taylor persuaded her ex-husband to *take out a \$6,000 loan* to cover Tyrec’s senior year at a private school, where he regained a sense of stability, met his girlfriend, and focused more on schoolwork.
- Tyrec never took the SAT or ACT and took few of the courses required for four-year college admission; he enrolled in the local community college for two semesters, spread over a four-year period.
- Tyrec’s work experiences have been erratic; he recently landed a desirable construction job in lead abatement and says he wants to form a business with his cousin, remodeling homes and selling real estate.
- However, he is often preoccupied with simple survival; two of his good friends have been killed in recent years, and he’s hoping just to stay alive.

Billy Yanelli (white, working-class)

White, working class . . .

- Lives with his parents in the same house where he grew up.
- Financially, Billy's family is doing reasonably well; Billy's father's company unionized and his wages increased substantially.
- Billy's behavior problems continued in middle school and high school. He was suspended during his freshman year for accidentally slamming the door on one of the teachers and dropped out his sophomore year.
- Passed GED exam, recently became an apprentice in painters' union.
- He feels it is "too late" for him to attend college; he already has "heart set on a career"; unfortunately, his behavioral problems also undermine his success at work, and he is on probation in his apprentice program.
- Billy feels that, overall, he is "doing better than a lot of people," with a GED, a job, and a "nice car." His plans for the future include "just working and going, still having fun."

Katie Brindle (white, poor)

Mother, no HS diploma, poor, harsh judge of herself

Youths from Poor Families

- Katie lived in a **one-bedroom apartment with her husband, Dave, and her 16-month-old daughter, Nirani**; she and Dave have been married six months.
- About a year and a half later, **Katie and Dave have separated**; Nirani (now three) is living at Katie's older sister Jenna's house; Katie is cleaning houses and living alternately with her mother and with friends.
- After Katie's family moved to Florida when she was nine, they returned to Lower Richmond, where Katie did well in school but **began experimenting with drugs and fighting with other students**; she did not do well in high school and **got pregnant after her sophomore year**.
- **Being pregnant seemed to stabilize Katie**; she reduced her drug use, cut back on "partying," and made two efforts to return to high school, but **ultimately dropped out**.
- Motherhood has proved difficult; **Katie feels she is not a good mother and that she lets her anger get out of control**.
- Katie's goals are to **earn a GED, get a job, and have her own apartment**: "I want everything to be right before I take [Nirani]," she says.

Harold McAllister (African American, poor):

(Big dreams, No diploma, avoided 'lock-up')

- Harold **shares an apartment** with his brother, his brother's girlfriend, and their three kids.
- He **works as a waiter** at a suburban chain restaurant, where he started working five years ago as a busboy.
- Harold began high school in a “school within a school” college prep program; he liked it but was removed after a year and reassigned to the general education program, perhaps because he had been late a few times and gotten a D in English.
- His grades were mostly Bs and Cs and he was not selected for high school basketball (he insists this was because the coach wanted him to play football). He took the busboy job to “get [his] mind off basketball” and, **by junior year, he was working full time.**
- He began staying with his father and **going to school less and less often, finally dropping out six weeks before graduation;** he hopes to go back to school someday.
- Unlike many African American men who are high school dropouts, Harold has never been “locked up,” though he had a close call; he feels that **Blacks are treated differently from whites and recounts a racial profiling incident from his own life.**
- He hopes to be married and have children by the time he is 25; he also **dreams of owning his own business, possibly a corner grocery store, and earning enough to be able to retire at 35.**

Recurring Themes and Persistent Patterns of Difference in Daily Life

- All the young adults followed life paths that were fully embedded in a larger social context; no one grew into adulthood in isolation.
- Many of the patterns found in the youths' life paths are echoed in national data (they're not so different from their peers)
 - ▣ Young adults from middle-class families were more likely to graduate from high school, apply to four-year colleges, gain admission, and enroll.
 - ▣ Parents and kids in working-class and poor families had college aspirations, but these goals were generally not realized.
- Siblings tended to follow similar life paths
- None of the families experienced a dramatic shift in life circumstances (limited social mobility)
- Still, differences between working-class and poor families were *more noticeable by the time the youth had become adolescents.*

Richmond High (working class and poor)

- Large, older, urban public school that had issues with drugs, fights, and poor attendance.
- About half the student body came from low-income families.
- Considered to be a “bad school”—less desirable than a magnet school.
- Oversight appeared to be lax—many students reported that they routinely remained in the cafeteria for the *entire day*.
- Offered a much more basic and slow-moving curriculum than that found in suburban high schools, including no AP courses.
- Districtwide SAT scores averaged a combined total of 756 [1 1 34].
- There was one guidance counselor per 430 students..
- The school offered a program to help students with college applications, but none of the families mentioned this service during the follow-up interviews.

High schools attended by middle-class kids

(four different ones)

- The middle-class youth attended four different high schools, all of which:
 - Offered **fast-paced, challenging curricula**, including a large array of AP courses; some of the schools offered an International Baccalaureate Program.
 - Had **average class sizes about half that of Lower Richmond**.
 - Received over twice the rate of passage on state proficiency tests than Lower Richmond.
 - Had **average SAT scores of around 1065 [1598]**.
 - Had **one counselor for every 250 students**.
 - Received accolades by *U.S. News and World Report*.
 - Had **dropout rates under 7 percent and college-going rates over 90 percent**.
 - Had **active parent volunteer programs and educational foundations** that annually raised thousands of dollars for school equipment, teacher grants, and college scholarships.

Networks, Work, and Resources

- As the youth transitioned to adulthood, **nearly all sought to enter the labor market**, either by being hired for paid employment or by securing an internship in a work setting.
- **Parents used their own social networks to help the kids gain access to work**, but the jobs parents could help get their children differed:
 - ▣ Working-class and poor youth generally were referred to lower-level blue-collar jobs or, in a few instances, lower-level white-collar jobs (Katie's mother helped Katie get a job **cleaning houses**; Harold's brother-in-law helped him get a job as a **busboy** in a chain restaurant).
 - ▣ Alexander's mother arranged for him to be an **intern in a medical office** in order to build his resume for his premed college applications; Stacey was a camp counselor, a position with characteristics similar to those needed for a career in education or counseling.

Work experience differences

- The amount of time young people spent in the labor force also differed:
 - ▣ Harold started **working full time at age fifteen**.
 - ▣ Wendy **worked two jobs in high school**.
 - ▣ Garrett, Alexander, and Stacey had much more **limited experience in the labor force**.
- Many of the young people describing their pleasure at reaching driving age; getting a license is an important mark of adulthood as well as a prerequisite for applying for many jobs. Many of the youth knew how to drive, but not all were licensed; others had received their driver's licenses but then had them suspended.

Awareness of Social Class

(Invisible privilege)

- The middle-class young adults appeared largely unaware of the advantages that had been bestowed upon them by virtue of their social class, **stressing instead their own hard work.**
- By contrast, the working-class and poor youth and their families were keenly aware of neighborhoods where life was different, and **many dreamed of moving to the suburbs someday**—Billy spoke of a friend whose life turned around after moving to a middle-class suburban community, saying “They have it a lot more easier in terms of life.”
- Moreover, working-class and poor young adults appeared to have **absorbed some of the “hidden injuries of class,”** including feelings of a **lack of dignity and respect** associated with their social position—Billy has internalized the idea that middle-class people are “better people than us.”

Negotiating with Institutions

Superficially Similar, Deeply Divergent

- At a superficial level, there were similarities in the approaches the middle-class, working-class, and poor parents took as they tried to help their children: **all wanted their children to be successful in life**, which now often requires getting a college education.
- At a deeper level, however, there was a class divergence in informal education about how institutions, including schools, function:
 - ▣ Middle-class parents appeared to **embrace the idea that it was their responsibility to carefully manage every step of their child's transition to college**, gathering information, reminding their adolescents to sign up for tests, and watching for potential problems.
 - ▣ Working-class and poor parents **did not appear to see continuous monitoring as critically important**, gathering information on an ad hoc basis, and **generally knowing little about the transition from high school to college**.

Informal Knowledge: Middle-Class Families

- Private schools and elite suburban schools that enroll upper-middle-class youth often **give intensive assistance with college applications**.
- Schools **invite and expect parent involvement** in many areas of their children's schooling, thus giving an advantage to parents who have more information and who presume that they should intervene.
- In middle-class families, the **college application process was a major life event** for the youth and for the parents and had many components: gathering information, visiting colleges, narrowing a list of schools, writing essays, submitting applications, waiting for decisions, deciding where to go.
- **Middle-class parents had been to college themselves**, and thus had more experience with the higher education system as well as access to an array of information through their informal networks; thus, they were able to supplement school-supplied information.

Informal Knowledge: Working-Class and Poor Families

- Parents in working-class and poor families saw themselves as having an active role in their children's careers; those whose children had dropped out of high school were deeply upset and agitated by their children's actions.
- For many youth, including Billy, Katie, and Harold, going to college was never a serious consideration, and the focus was on graduating from high school (or earning a GED).
- Among those who did pursue higher education, informal knowledge about schooling options was limited: they did not distinguish between vocational training programs and research universities and lacked a hierarchical notion of the value of different types of diplomas.

Working class / poor families and informal knowledge

(slide 2)

- These parents, many of whom had not graduated from high school themselves and lacked independent sources of information about schools, **turned over responsibility for education to schools.**
- These parents tended to be **misinformed about a variety of issues:**
 - ▣ Katie Brindle's mother was concerned about Katie's physical safety and wanted her to go to a high school close to home, not realizing that other schools were more highly ranked.
 - ▣ The Yanelli family did not realize that a local magnet high schools' application relied on their son Billy's 7th grade—not 8th grade—grades.
 - ▣ Wendy Driver's stepfather, Mack Fallon, believed that college application fees were refunded if the applicant was not admitted, and her **mother was unaware of the seasonal aspect of the college application process.**
- The young adults from working-class and poor families **shared their parent's hazy understanding of college.**

Middle-Class Families: Concerted Cultivation Continues

- Middle-class families continued to work actively with their children, and with the schools, to increase their children's opportunities:
 - ▣ The Williams family undertook an elaborate college search process.
 - ▣ The Marshalls enrolled Stacey in a summer algebra class to give her a “boost” in math before she began high school (yeeecchhhh!)
 - ▣ Even when Stacey was hundreds of miles away at college, her mother gave her detailed advice on course selection and stressed the importance of Stacey working with her academic advisor.
 - ▣ The Handlons kept up vigorous oversight of their daughter's schooling, working closely with teachers to accommodate Melanie's needs.
 - ▣ Mr. Tallinger spoke to the coach of Garrett's summer-league team about increasing his playing time, since college coaches scout at summer games.

Working-Class and Poor Families: Accomplishment of Natural Growth persists

- For working-class and poor youth, whose parents appeared to continue the pattern of the accomplishment of natural growth, educational careers were handled at school, by teachers and counselors and the students themselves:
 - ▣ When Harold was removed from the magnet charter school he was in, his parents did not intervene to try to keep him in the program.
 - ▣ Similarly, when Harold was rejected from the basketball team and wanted to transfer to another public high school, his father didn't do the necessary paperwork to help him get in.
 - ▣ Ms. Taylor cajoled, pressured, and nagged Tyrec to go to college, but she viewed the actual interactions with institutions (e.g., signing Tyrec up for the SAT, filling out college application, visiting colleges, etc.) as outside the purview of parents and up to the school.

“Heartbreak” . . .

- Nationally, and among the *Unequal Childhoods* families, working-class and poor children were **less likely to graduate from high school and enroll in college**; as a result, **their parents were more likely to experience heartbreak** over educational disappointments than were middle-class parents:
 - About Tyrec dropping out of community college after one semester, Ms. Taylor said she “felt hopeless” and was “disappointed, you know, as a mother would be.”
 - Discussing Billy’s decision to leave high school in his sophomore year, Mr. Yanelli, who was a high school dropout, said, “It broke my heart.”
- **Middle-class parents generally were spared this kind of crushing disappointment**, though they empathized with their children over setbacks such as not getting into their first-choice college.

Parents' sacrifices

Awareness differed by class

- Working-class and poor youths also showed a much greater awareness of the sacrifices their parents had made on their behalf and a knowledge of the burdens their sacrifices entailed:
 - Tyrec knew his parents had borrowed money for his education, and he seemed to feel a greater commitment to his studies as a result.
 - When Wendy was in high school, she held two jobs; the money she earned mainly paid for her own expenses, but she also sometimes gave her mother money to help with family bills.
- *While middle-class parents were transferring economic resources to their young adults, the working-class and poor young adults were often transferring resources to their parents.*

The Importance of Class-Based Cultural Repertoires

- What are the implications of this evidence of persisting patterns?
 - ▣ We need to broaden and reconceptualize our analysis of **how social class does, and does not, matter in daily life.**
 - ▣ We need to pay attention to the **drawbacks of middle-class family life** (and the **potential advantages of the cultural repertoires of working-class and poor families**).
 - ▣ The logic and legitimacy of **working-class and poor parents' dependence on educators** need systematic attention; treating teachers like surgeons—as experts in their field—would allow them to reap vastly more respect and deference than they frequently receive from middle-class parents (**flattery will get you Somewhere?**)

Summing Up: Class and the Transition to Adulthood

- When they were ten years old, the middle-class youth seemed **worldly, blasé, and hard to impress**, while the working-class and poor children seemed **younger, bouncier, and more childlike**.
- **Ten years later, the pattern had reversed**; it was the middle-class youth who seemed younger and more upbeat; by contrast, the working-class and poor youth were generally working full time in jobs they did not like and had pressing responsibilities such as raising children, paying for food and board, and making monthly car payments. They **remained optimistic, but they had struggled in a way that the middle-class youth had not**.
- Of course, there is variation among the members of all social classes; some middle-class youth, like Melanie, have learning disabilities or other issues that lead them to not attend college, while some working-class and poor youth, often with the assistance of an influential teacher, become first-generation college students—however, these are *variations*, not the norm.