

Chapter Twelve

THE POWER AND LIMITS OF SOCIAL CLASS

- At the end of fifth grade, the children looked forward to their transition to being with “big kids” in the local middle school, but the tenor of the graduation ceremonies differed:
 - At Lower Richmond, there was tremendous enthusiasm for the ceremony, particularly on the part of the children and their families; mothers wore dressy clothes that they might wear to church; girls wore frilly dresses; and many of the children looked elated, smiling broadly at their families as they made their formal entrance.
 - At Swan, the children seemed pleased but were not bursting with excitement; parents were dressed in professional outfits and girls wore dresses that were not very frilly but nice and neat.
- The **speeches given at the two schools were also different:** “Swan seemed much more hopeful and Lower Richmond more aware of danger and trouble kids might face in their lives.”

The Power of Social Class

- In the United States, people disagree about the importance of social class in daily life:
 - **Many Americans** believe the country is fundamentally **open**, that people who demonstrate hard work, effort, and talent are likely to achieve upward mobility and that children have roughly equal life chances.
 - Some social scientists acknowledge that there are **systemic forms of inequality**, but see such **differences as a matter of gradation**, focusing on the ways specific patterns are related (e.g., the number of years of mothers' schooling and the size of children's vocabularies); implicitly and explicitly, these social scientists do not accept the position that there are identifiable, categorical differences in groups.

- *Unequal Childhoods* challenges both views, favoring a **categorical analysis wherein families are grouped into social categories**—such as poor, working class, and middle class—that help us understand the behavior of family members across a number of spheres.
- Thus, the book stresses how social **class dynamics are woven into the texture and rhythm of children's and parents' daily lives**, influencing such aspects of family life as time use, language use, and kin ties.
- When children and parents move outside the home into the world of social institutions, they find that their **cultural practices are not given equal value**; middle-class children benefit in invisible ways from the degree of **similarity between the cultural repertoires in the home and standards adopted by institutions**.

The Limits of Social Class

- Among the families observed in the study, some aspects of daily life did not vary systematically by social class:
 - Every family experienced episodes of laughter, emotional connection, happiness, and quiet connection.
 - Every family had rituals, such as favorite meals, television programs, important toys or games, or family outings they looked forward to.
 - In all social classes (*society?*), a substantial part of children's days was spent in repetitive rituals such as taking showers, getting dressed, brushing teeth, etc.
 - Across social classes children and parents had different temperaments; some were shy and quiet, some were outgoing and talkative.
 - The degree of organization and orderliness in daily life also did not vary systematically by social class.

Concerted Cultivation and the Accomplishment of Natural Growth

- Despite these important areas of shared practices, social class made a significant difference in the routines of children's daily lives.
- The white and Black **middle-class parents** engaged in practices of **concerted cultivation**.
- The working-class and poor parents viewed children's development as unfolding spontaneously, as long as they were provided with **comfort, food, shelter, and other basic support**—the **accomplishment of natural growth**.
- Across all social classes, child-rearing practices often appeared to be natural—as automatic and unconscious as breathing—and **parents were scarcely aware that they were orienting their children in specific ways**.

Concerted Cultivation

- Parents **actively foster and assess** children's talents, opinions, and skills.
- Parents **schedule their children** for activities.
- **Parents reason with children.**
- Parents hover over children and **intervene on children's behalf outside the home.**
- Parents make a **deliberate and sustained effort to stimulate children's development** and to cultivate their cognitive and social skills.

Accomplishment of Natural Growth

- Children spend time in and around the home, playing informally, and have more **autonomy regarding leisure time.**
- Children are **more responsible for their lives outside the home.**
- Adult-organized activities are uncommon.
- Language is used as a conduit for social life and **directives are common.**
- **Boundaries between adults and children** are clearly marked.
- In institutional encounters, **parents defer to professionals** and feel less capable and less efficacious than they would like.

The Intersection of Race and Class

- Middle-class Black fathers in the study told tales of **unequal treatment on the basis of race**: one father reported white women clutching their purses as he walked by to use the cash machine in an upscale shopping district.
- Parents of middle-class African American children **kept a keen eye out for signs of racial problems**, as when a first-grade boy told Alexander Williams (son of a lawyer) that **he could only be a garbage man** when he grew up.
- Although they moved heavily within white worlds, parents sought to **avoid having their children be the only Black child at an event** and encouraged children to develop a positive self-image that specifically included their racial identity.
- Nevertheless, race seemed to matter less in children's daily lives than did their social class, at least in fourth grade.

How Does It Matter?

- Both concerted cultivation and the accomplishment of natural growth **offer intrinsic benefits** (and burdens) for parents and their children.
- These practices are **accorded different social values by important social institutions**.
- Some family cultural practices, notably those associated with concerted cultivation, **give children advantages that other cultural practices do not**.

Concerted Cultivation

- Children learn to develop and value an individualized sense of self.
- Children improve their skills and learn to perform and present themselves.
- Family **schedules are disrupted**.
- Dinner hours are hard to arrange.
- Siblings spend hours waiting and going from event to event.
- Parents must reconcile **conflicting priorities**.
- **All family members seem exhausted**.

Accomplishment of Natural Growth

- Children learn to entertain themselves.
- Children are **not exhausted and do not complain of being bored**.
- Children are occasionally disappointed when finances or lack of transportation conspire to prevent or limit their participation in activities.
- Many children **watch unrestricted television**.
- **Family ties are very strong**, especially among siblings but also with extended families.

- Within the home, the two approaches to child rearing each have identifiable strengths and weaknesses; outside the home, however, concerted cultivation offers clear benefits to middle class children:
 - Middle-class family members appear reasonably comfortable and entitled, while working-class and poor family members appear uncomfortable and constrained.
 - Working-class and poor parents tend to have much more distance or separation from schools, sometimes seeming baffled, intimidated, and subdued in conferences; when they do try to intervene in their children's educational experiences, they often feel ineffectual.
 - Working-class parents sometimes express distrust, telling children to outwardly comply with school officials but resist school authority.
 - Skills learned through concerted cultivation, such as making eye contact and being assertive, have greater promise of being capitalized into future social profits.

Why? The Search for Explanations

- Some commentators decry the “overscheduled” lives of children and long for the days when most children had unstructured lives, filled with informal play.
- This is a romanticized view of the family in the past; for much of U.S. history, children played an important economic role in family life, working in factories and helping out on family farms.
- The period after 1920 saw a dramatic decline in children’s economic contributions as child labor laws were put into place and a new vision of the “economically useless but sentimentally priceless child” took hold.
- The “institutionalization of children’s leisure” and the rise of concerted cultivation are recent developments; parents of all 88 children in the study were raised according to the logic of the accomplishment of natural growth.

- Modern life, and the impact of increasing “rationalization” (or standardization of daily life) seems to be a decisive factor in this historical shift.
- According to George Ritzer, principles from the world of fast food have been adapted to other parts of social life (the “McDonaldization of society”), including family life, which is growing more systematic, predictable, and regulated.
- Forces converging to bring about this change include:
 - increasing concerns about the safety of children who play unsupervised on local streets
 - rises in employment (resulting in adults being at home less)
 - a decline in the availability of neighborhood playmates due to a dropping birth rate
 - the effects of suburbanization, especially the increased size of homes and decreased density of housing

- Any analysis of the rise of concerted cultivation must also grapple with the changing position of the United States in the world economy, and the accompanying **decline in highly paid manufacturing jobs and increase in less desirable service jobs.**
- It is very likely that when today's children are adults, their **standard of living will be lower than that of their parents;** since children must be successful in school to gain access to desirable positions, many middle-class parents are anxious to make sure their children perform well academically and have numerous extracurricular activities, which gatekeepers such as college admissions officers applaud.
- **Concerted cultivation is thus legitimated while the older logic of child rearing, the accomplishment of natural growth, receives less institutional support.**

The Role of Resources

- **Parents' economic resources contributed** to the class differences in child rearing discussed in the book: children's activities were expensive and required other advantages, such as reliable public transportation and flexibility in work schedules to be able to get children to events.
- **Differences in educational resources were important** as well; middle class parents' superior levels of education gave them larger vocabularies and more knowledge with which to intervene in institutions outside the home.

- Parents' occupations and working conditions, particularly the complexity of their work, also influenced important aspects of their child-rearing beliefs:
 - Middle-class parents' uncertainties about the economic future made them feel it was important that their **children be developed in order to enhance their future possibilities**, resulting in a strategy of concerted cultivation.
 - For working-class and poor families, economic shortages and the deadening quality of work or dependence on public assistance most affected their views about adulthood and childhood; **they wanted their children to spend their youth being happy and relaxed**, resulting in a strategy of the accomplishment of natural growth.

- Unequal access to resources is not the only factor that influences child-rearing practices by social class:
 - While some poor and working-class parents would have wanted their children to engage in more organized activities if they could afford it, other parents did not view children’s participation in activities as particularly important.
 - Other parents were quite dubious of the hectic schedules of middle-class children like Alexander Williams, having reactions like “I think he is a sad kid” and “He must be dead-dog tired.”
- Still, there were a few indications that **if parents’ economic and social resources were to change, their cultural practices would shift as well**, as evidenced by the middle-class parents in the study who were upwardly mobile, having grown up poor or working class. (**class as a driving force**)

What Is To Be Done?

- **State intervention** would probably be the most direct and effective way to reduce the kinds of social inequality described in *Unequal Childhoods*:
 - A **child allowance**, similar to what Sweden and other Western European nations provide, would likely be very effective in eliminating child poverty and reducing the gap in economic and social resources.
 - An **increase in federal and state recreation monies** would also be useful—more affluent townships are able to offer more elaborate recreational programs.
 - **Vouchers for extracurricular activities and transportation** to activities would enable more children to participate, as would consolidating neighborhoods so that working-class and poor children could access desirable facilities.
- **This redistribution of wealth is unlikely**, however, since Americans are more preoccupied with individual solutions.

Slowing It Down: Policy Implications for Middle-Class Families

- A social movement of professionals and middle-class parents that resists the over-scheduling of children's lives is emerging: grassroots organizations are pressuring coaches and activity leaders to make family time a priority (by, for example, not scheduling events on Sundays or not penalizing children who miss games while on vacation).
- Doubts about the value of extensive reasoning with children are also mounting, and professionals are signaling the need for parents to provide directives to children, describing rude, obnoxious, and ungrateful children and calling on parents to "set limits and make decisions."
- Ironically, this new agenda amounts to a reinstatement of many of the elements of the strategy of the accomplishment of natural growth.

Gaining Compliance with Dominant Standards: Implications for Working-Class and Poor Families

- For working-class and poor families, the policy recommendations center on trying to **gain advantages for children in institutional settings**; some programs stress the importance of reading to children, bolstering vocabulary, and addressing “summer setback” (children’s tendency to lose academic ground when they are out of school).
- Policies could also be developed to **help professionals learn how to be more sensitive to differences in cultural practices and how to “code switch”**; they, in turn, might be able to teach children to “code switch” as they move between home and institutions.
- Programs that offer to working-class and poor children the kinds of concerted cultivation middle-class children get at home**—ranging from private tutoring to programs like Big Brother/Big Sister—have been successful, improving academic performance and reducing behavior problems.

Biography and Social Structure

- Social group membership structures life opportunities.
- The social structure of inequality is not all determining—some may overcome the predicted odds—but it exists.
- Looking at social class differences in the standards of institutions provides a vocabulary for understanding inequality; it highlights the ways in which institutional standards give some people an advantage over others as well as the unequal ways that cultural practices in the home pay off in settings outside the home.
- A vocabulary of social structure and social class is vastly preferable to a moral vocabulary that blames individuals for their life's circumstances and is also more accurate than relying only on race categories.