

## Paradoxical Pathways: An Ethnographic Extension of Kohn's Findings on Class and Childrearing

*Stratification is a central issue in family research, yet relatively few studies highlight its impact on family processes. Drawing on in-depth interviews (N = 137) and observational data (N = 12), we extend Melvin Kohn's research on childrearing values by examining how parental commitments to self-direction and conformity are enacted in daily life. Consistent with Kohn's findings, middle-class parents emphasized children's self-direction, and working-class and poor parents emphasized children's conformity to external authority. Attempts to realize these values appeared paradoxical, however. Middle-class parents routinely exercised subtle forms of control while attempting to instill self-direction in their children. Conversely, working-class and poor parents tended to grant children considerable autonomy in certain domains of daily life, thereby limiting their emphasis on conformity.*

The relation between social structure and parenting has been a long-standing interest in

the social sciences, yielding a large literature that seeks to explain variations across social classes in childrearing (for an overview, see Hoff, Laursen, & Tardif, 2002). One of the most important figures in this area is Melvin Kohn. Over the course of nearly 5 decades, Kohn has studied the psychological consequences of social class, especially as it impacts family life (Kohn, 1959, 1963, 1969; Kohn & Schooler, 1983; Kohn & Slomczynski, 1993). In particular, he and various colleagues have investigated how occupational conditions stemming from class membership affect the value commitments through which parents approach childrearing, with middle-class parents emphasizing self-direction and working-class parents stressing conformity to external authority.

As surveys of the field have noted, however (e.g., Hoff et al., 2002), the assumption that value commitments mediate the relation between social structure and parenting behaviors requires strict empirical evaluation. We thus seek to extend Kohn's finding concerning the relation between class and childrearing values by drawing on an ethnographic data set that includes both detailed interviews and observations. We use these data to analyze the roles self-direction and conformity play in the childrearing practices of middle-class, working-class, and poor families. Our goal is to extend the analysis of the class-childrearing relation beyond an acknowledged (Kohn, 1977, pp. xxxii – xxxiii) limitation of previous studies: their reliance on reports of behavior rather

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than direct observation. By closely examining parents' attempts to enact value commitments in childrearing, we hope to clarify processes that remain partially obscure in the research carried out by Kohn and his colleagues.

Our paper focuses on how parents enact commitments to self-direction and conformity in two domains of family life: verbal interaction between parents and children and the use of leisure time. As Kohn leads us to expect, we find abundant evidence that in the day-to-day business of childrearing, middle-class parents tend to stress the importance of self-direction. They often place their children in situations in which they must make decisions and then prod them to provide (rudimentary) justifications. Middle-class parents also tend to use leisure activities to promote children's nascent sense of curiosity and self-control. Working-class (and poor) parents, by contrast, tend to stress conformity to external authority. This is clearest in their relatively frequent use of directives in interactions with their children. As a consequence of these contrasting emphases, children have substantially different experiences depending on the economic position of their families. Beyond this, however, we find that the way in which a commitment to conformity or self-direction is "translated" into actual childrearing practices is far from simple. Children are regularly placed in settings largely antithetical to these values. Middle-class children are frequently the objects of adult micromanagement and control in precisely those contexts that are expected to promote self-direction; their working-class (and poor) counterparts, by contrast, are often placed in settings that leave them largely free of parental control. Thus, although we find clear evidence of the value commitments Kohn has documented, we also identify paradoxical pathways to their enactment.

### *Theoretical Background*

Despite numerous revisions and expansions over the years, much of Kohn's work revolves around a particular explanatory account of the relationship between class and psychological functioning (see Kohn, 1977, pp. xxv–lx; Mortimer, 1993; Spenner, 1988, 1998). In very general terms, this model can be summarized as follows: One's position in the social division of labor exerts effects on psychological functioning primarily in an indirect manner; certain

"conditions of life" resulting from class position mediate the relationship. Of these, Kohn asserts, it is occupational self-direction that does the majority of relay work: Membership in the different social classes entails differences in the level of self-direction individuals exercise in their jobs, and these differences have pronounced psychological consequences (Kohn, 1963, pp. 475–476; Kohn & Slomczynski, 1993, pp. 230–235). Self-direction, in turn, is defined in terms of the "use of initiative, thought, and independent judgment in work" (Kohn & Slomczynski, p. 110). As such, it is intended to be a multidimensional concept. Its constitutive elements include the substantive complexity of work typically performed, the closeness of supervision that the individual experiences, and the degree of routinization (i.e., repetitiveness and predictability) of his or her job activities (Kohn & Slomczynski, pp. 110–113). According to Kohn, because work comprises a central, "imperative" activity in modern societies, the experiences engendered in the occupational sphere give rise to a process of "learning generalization" with respect to self-direction and thereby come to affect various aspects of psychological orientation in other domains of life (Kohn & Schooler, 1983, p. 142; Kohn & Slomczynski, pp. 6–7).

Kohn's unwavering interest in the various relationships implied by this model has led him to develop ever more sophisticated versions of it. Thus, he has carried out longitudinal analyses (Kohn & Schooler, 1983; Kohn & Slomczynski, 1993) and, more recently, complex comparative ones (Kohn & Slomczynski), including a consideration of the impact that large-scale social transformations have on the relationship between social structure and personality (Kohn, 2006). Importantly, his more recent work has also utilized newer statistical techniques to test for reciprocal effects at each step of the model, with results that strongly support his basic contention of a fundamental process stretching from class to psychological functioning by way of occupational self-direction.

On the substantive side, Kohn's interest in the psychological dimension led him, from a very early date, to focus on manifestations of class within family dynamics. In particular, he has returned again and again to the question of whether the experience of self-direction in work can be causally connected to variations in the degree to which parents value self-direction

and conformity for their children (Kohn, 1959, 1963, 1969, 2006; Kohn & Schooler, 1983; Kohn & Slomczynski, 1993). He has further attempted to establish that these parental values are, in fact, reflected in children's values, and has even developed some tentative analyses of the transmission process through which such a result may come about (Kohn & Slomczynski, pp. 171–201). It is this (central) line of Kohn's research—his pursuit of the relation between class and self-direction within family dynamics—that we are concerned with here.

Kohn's methodological approach to discerning parents' value orientations has been to develop a list of characteristics children may exhibit (e.g., consideration, curiosity, obedience, good manners) and then to ask parents either to select items from the list (the most or least important) or to rank them in order of desirability (see Kohn, 1969, pp. 18–20). Respondents' choices are then analyzed for underlying patterns, which are interpreted in terms of value differences. "Self-direction" and "conformity" are understood to be poles of a continuum:

Middle-class parents . . . are more likely to emphasize their children's *self-direction*, and working-class parents to emphasize their *conformity to external authority*. This basic tendency is apparent in the greater propensity of middle-class parents to choose consideration and self-control, and of working-class parents to choose obedience and neatness, as highly desirable. (Kohn, 1969, pp. 34–35)

A stress on self-direction "focuses on *internal* standards of behavior" (Kohn, 1969, p. 35): It emphasizes the importance of the intention behind actions (Kohn, 1969, p. 35), the emergence of "personally responsible standards of morality" (Kohn & Slomczynski, 1993, p. 86), and an independent decision-making faculty. In contrast, conformity, for Kohn, is understood in terms of obedience to the appropriate authority figures, an unambiguous understanding of right and wrong, and a clear recognition of the consequences of actions (1969, p. 35). The existence of this underlying value opposition has been confirmed in data collected in numerous countries under widely varying social conditions (Kohn & Schoenbach, 1993).

The existence of class-specific differences in family life is now widely accepted, with numerous investigators having reported contrasts of

greater or lesser similarity to Kohn's "self-direction/conformity" distinction (Franklin & Scott, 1970; Grabb, 1981; Morgan, Alwin, & Griffin, 1979; Mortimer & Kumka, 1982; Spade, 1991; Wright & Wright, 1976). Nevertheless, as Gecas (1979) noted some time ago, the question of how these contrasting value commitments may impact the actual texture and experience of family life calls for greater attention. To be sure, Kohn's (1969, pp. 91–107) celebrated study of the conditions under which parents from different classes resort to punishment of their children has provided insight into the relation between childrearing values and parental behavior. Yet such studies remain rare. In this paper, we show that approaching this topic via participant-observation and in-depth interviewing captures subtle connections between parents' childrearing values and behavior that are less likely to emerge when more standardized data-collection tools are used.

#### METHOD

Our data are drawn from a study, directed by the second author, of the families of 88 children ages 8 to 10 years old. As with most qualitative research, the sample is nonrandom; recruitment of the families was done purposively and carefully, however.

#### Sample

The participating families were located by gaining access to two classrooms in a public elementary school in the Midwestern town where the second author lived at the time. Help from the district superintendant facilitated access to the school. In size, racial balance, and teaching philosophy, it was similar to all other schools in this homogeneous district; it enrolled relatively even numbers of White and African-American children and a small number of Asians and Hispanics. Observations were conducted in the school's two third-grade classrooms. The classroom visits provided opportunities to get to know the children, teachers, and parents. On the basis of the teachers' information concerning each family's social characteristics, children were categorized by social class, race, and gender. (At times, every *n*th name was selected to keep the groups comparable in size.) Letters sent to parents to solicit participation yielded a response rate of over 90%, resulting in a sample of 36 children and their families.

Two-hour interviews took place with mothers; when possible, fathers also were interviewed, separately. Because the district included few middle-class African American families and few poor White families, the sample's class profile was skewed. This limitation led the second author to recruit additional families when she moved to a large urban area in the Northeast.

Because schools in this second community tend to be heavily stratified by class and race, it was necessary to incorporate two additional public schools into the study: one in a large urban district and one in a predominantly White, affluent suburb. For the urban location, district data guided the selection of three possible elementary schools. All had relatively high White enrollments, were K–5, had a majority of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch, and were medium sized. Access to one was facilitated with help of a district employee (an acquaintance of the second author) who secured cooperation from the principal. Informal social networks also helped provide access to the suburban public school. This school had a strong reputation, was predominantly White, was K–5, did not have a free lunch program, and was medium sized. In both schools, classroom observations were carried out, children were grouped into categories, letters were sent home, and parents were interviewed. Once again, however, there were too few children from middle-class African American families and from poor White families; additional families were recruited through various means, such as informal social networks and organizations serving the poor. In all, 137 interviews were completed by the second author (a White middle-aged woman) and a small, racially diverse group of research assistants. Additional interviews were carried out with teachers, principals, and certain other professional figures (e.g., doctors) with whom the children interacted. The interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and coded (see below).

Extensive observations of a subset of families whose lives seemed to reflect the themes that had emerged from the interviews were also carried out. These families were paid for their participation; 12 of the 19 asked to participate agreed. Three quarters of these families came from the classrooms in the two most recently added schools. Once the children were grouped by gender, class, race, and family structure, selection options were significantly narrowed;

for some categories, there were only two or three potential candidates. Within these constraints, however, efforts were made to balance the sample in various ways (e.g., to have a deeply religious family for each class category). When the classrooms failed to yield sufficient candidates to meet certain sampling goals, work-arounds were devised. For example, the original intention was for the observational subsample to include only two-parent families. But because no middle-class African American children in the observed classrooms met this criterion, families were recruited from other schools. In the case of poor families, the two-parent criterion proved impossible to sustain, so one child from a single-parent family and one who lived under the care of her grandmother were recruited.

As mentioned, recruitment to both phases of the study was guided by demographic considerations (class, gender, race, and family structure). In this regard, it should be noted that our use of the “class” idiom for describing socioeconomic status is largely a function of the fact that, within our data, childrearing practices, the object of the analysis, exhibit a clustered pattern. The group of families we designate as “middle class” all include at least one adult who was employed in a job that entailed substantive managerial authority or presupposed higher level, credentialed skills. In the observational subsample, these families had very high annual incomes, ranging from the \$85,000–\$95,000 bracket to \$240,000, and all but one contained at least one adult with a postbaccalaureate degree. (Thus, they fall into what might be called the “upper middle class” in everyday parlance.) The “working-class” group, by contrast, is composed of families in which at least one adult was regularly employed, but no adult met the criteria for “middle class.” In the observational subsample, annual incomes in this group ranged from the \$15,000–\$25,000 bracket to the \$40,000–\$50,000 bracket; only one adult had a baccalaureate degree, and a number were high school dropouts. Finally, we also established a category for families in which no adult participated in the formal economy on a regular basis, which, for the sake of convenience, we designated as “poor.” In the observational subsample, families in this category had incomes ranging from under \$10,000 to \$18,000, mainly from public assistance, and only about one half of the adults had graduated from high school. This operationalization of stratification

thus conceals a considerable degree of variation, an unavoidable consequence of research carried out using low-*N* data sets. It also needs to be acknowledged that our operationalization was not designed to match that used by Kohn, and our results therefore cannot be read as an attempt at verification. Nevertheless, we maintain that this blunt class categorization is sufficient for examining the relation between parents' class positions, their childrearing values, and their attempts to realize those values.

### *Fieldwork*

During the observational phase of the study, the second author or assistants, or both, visited each family about 20 times, typically within the span of 1 month. These visits were not restricted to participants' homes; researchers accompanied the children—and often other family members—on trips to various places (health check-ups, sports practices, recitals) and joined them while they “hung out” with friends or relatives. Visits lasted 2–3 hours, on average, though sometimes they were considerably longer. Field-workers usually carried tape recorders and wrote up extensive field notes following their observations. They spoke regularly with the second author in order to ensure that all relevant data were correctly incorporated into their field notes and to discuss their observations in light of the project's emerging analytic themes. In every case, at least one field-worker who regularly visited belonged to the same racial group as the target child; typically, one field-worker was of the same gender as well. In most cases, there was one overnight visit with each family.

Initially, the presence of the researchers undoubtedly affected behavior in these households. Over the course of regular, repeated visits, however, routines resumed, and behaviors that had been absent at first (e.g., swearing, squabbling) began to materialize. Children appeared to enjoy being in the study; many mentioned that the visits made them feel “special.” In exit interviews, children described some specific shifts in their parents' behavior (e.g., the house was cleaner), but overall, they reported little significant difference. Most of the observations took place between December 1993 and August 1995. The second author conducted about one

half of the interviews and about one quarter of the fieldwork.

### *Analysis and Argument*

The study began as an effort to understand the impact of class on various dimensions of family life and, especially, the use of leisure time and verbal interactions between parents and children. Although the second author and her research team had “sensitizing concepts” when they entered the field, the study was open ended. Bourdieu's ideas concerning the intergenerational reproduction of advantage were the most important guiding concepts; Kohn's work did not play a central role. Throughout the data collection process, the second author sought to clarify her interpretation of the data by discussing the research with others and writing analytic memos.

To prepare the data for analysis, we developed dozens of codes relating to key factors and especially to children's leisure activities. In addition to identifying each activity, the codes identified parents' reasons for liking or disliking these activities (e.g., “like: basketball,” “like: art,” “why like?” “why not like?”), the costs entailed by children's activities, and phenomena such as conflicts (between spouses, parents and children, parents and providers, etc.) associated with these activities. Each interview was ultimately coded according to a detailed system of over 100 categories using a qualitative software program. In addition, data matrices were assembled to provide a visual overview of major themes. These had various concepts on the vertical axis and the families (arranged according to sociodemographic characteristics) on the horizontal axis; quotations from the interviews were pasted into the cells. The matrices enabled us to observe broad patterns in the interviews and to look for disconfirming evidence. For the 12 families in the observational study, a modified form of this approach was followed; the software program was not used, but we created computer files for various codes. Both authors also reread the field notes and interviews, putting key observations and quotes back in context to ensure that there had not been a distortion in the interpretation and meaning of a piece of evidence.

The analysis of these data resulted in a series of publications by the second author

(Lareau, 2002, 2003) arguing that childrearing strategies tend to vary according to parents' class location. Simplifying somewhat, she maintained that middle-class parents typically feel compelled to actively cultivate children's skills and talents ("concerted cultivation"), whereas working-class and poor parents spend scarce resources to provide for and protect children, but otherwise assume that they will grow and thrive spontaneously ("accomplishment of natural growth"). These publications made only incidental reference to the work of Kohn; yet, in presentations and correspondence, queries frequently arose regarding its significance for this argument. This prompted us to reconsider the data with Kohn's findings in mind. Our expectation was that the two would "line up" quite easily, that is, that we would find a marked tendency toward the valuation of self-direction among the middle-class parents and a parallel tendency toward the valuation of conformity among the working-class (and possibly the poor) parents. This expectation was largely borne out; we also found, however, that the story became more complicated when we extended the analysis to actual attempts at value realization.

Once we had established the major premises discussed in this paper, we searched diligently for disconfirming evidence. For example, given the observation that working-class and poor children tended to spend long periods of time in independent play outside the house, we looked carefully for comparable periods in the middle-class data. The first author, hired as a postdoc after the fieldwork was completed, was intimately involved in this analysis. He took a leadership role in closely rereading Kohn's work, developing the specifics of the argument, and drafting the paper.

In the analysis, we focus on three White girls who participated in the observational phase of the study. This choice is arbitrary; we could have made the same case using three other children from the subsample. We also make strategic use of the interviews to provide context for the observational findings. Examining the views, opinions, and motivations of the parents of all 88 children enables us—within limits—to assess the degree to which the observational data may be idiosyncratic.

## RESULTS

### *Middle-Class Families*

In the spontaneous moments of daily life as well as during in-depth interviews, the middle-class parents often stressed the importance of children's curiosity, their desire to understand how and why things happen, their self-control, and their independence. Thus, they closely recalled the picture of middle-class childrearing values that Kohn began to sketch many years ago. In particular, these parents exhibited a focus on "internal" processes: Issues of intention, judgment, and decision all loomed large. This was particularly apparent in the context of parent-child interactions, in which parents more or less actively tried to instill an awareness of such processes. Nevertheless, in moving beyond Kohn to examine actual behavior, we also found that some typical activities in which middle-class children participated entailed substantial direct adult control and, hence, regulation by an "external" authority. This "mixed picture" was apparent in the case of Melanie Handlon, a White, middle-class girl.

*Self-direction through negotiation.* June and Harold Handlon have three children: Harry, an eighth grader, Tommy, a sixth grader, and Melanie, our focal child, who, at the time of our study, was fourth grader. Mr. Handlon has a master's degree and during our study was a credit manager in a major corporation. Ms. Handlon had completed 2 years of junior college and worked part time as a secretary at a nearby church. Their annual income was between \$85,000 and \$95,000, and they owned a comfortable home in the suburbs.

As Kohn's work led us to expect, Mr. and Ms. Handlon viewed their children's upbringing as a project that involved, among other things, fostering each child's capacity for self-direction. For example, Ms. Handlon asserted during an interview that "I really want them [my children] to become independent." She wanted her children to develop enough confidence in their own judgment to resist the pressure of their peers and understand—and empathize with—the experience of those who may be excluded from the group or ridiculed by it. Her children should learn "that sometimes you have to judge and think and stop before you say something. And you have to think about—if it would hurt me, should I say it to somebody else?"

Also consonant with Kohn's analysis, June and Harold Handlon rarely issued directives. Rather, whenever possible, the children had to "choose" what to do in a given situation. At times, this entailed giving them a menu of options rather than making a selection for them. In other cases, however, it entailed a lesson in reciprocity, which typically took the form of a negotiation, that is, a sequence in which the child expressed a preference, one of the parents expressed an alternative preference, and the two took turns explaining their positions to the other until one (often the parent) capitulated. The didactic element in these rituals was fairly evident: The children were being taught to justify their choices by providing convincing reasons while at the same time being exposed to another's perspective via the reasons offered for the alternative. That such interactions were important to the Handlons was made clear by their frequency. It was not typically the "big" decisions that engendered negotiations but the much more common "little" ones. This became clear in a routine scene in which Tommy decided to make fresh orange juice, and an exchange ensued concerning which squeezer to use:

Tommy: Can I use the electric one?

Ms. Handlon: No, use this one.

Tommy: Why can't I use the electric one?

Ms. Handlon: This one is here.

Tommy: I don't mean to argue, but the electric one is already out.

Ms. Handlon [sounding a little frustrated now]: Well, that must mean somebody used it. Alright, you can use it if you rinse it out when you're done.

Such negotiations were not reserved for the older children. Although Melanie did not display Tommy's level of skill, she had mastered a rudimentary form of negotiating with her parents. She demonstrated this one evening while the family is gathered around the television, watching figure skating. Melanie decided to practice "dancing" in the middle of the living room, in imitation of the skaters. In response to her frequent requests to "Watch me!" Ms. Handlon turned away from the program to look at her daughter. Melanie "danced" in front of the television, blocking the views of both Ms. Handlon and Tommy.

Ms. Handlon: Melanie you have to move. We can't see.

Melanie: But there's not enough room.

Ms. Handlon: If you want to dance, you have to move so that we can see the TV.

Melanie: Can I move the laundry basket?

Ms. Handlon repositioned the laundry basket (it was directly in front of her) to the wall behind the couch. Melanie moved so she was near Ms. Handlon—about 2 or 3 feet from the back wall—and continued "dancing." In seemingly trivial exchanges of this sort, Melanie was developing a capacity to justify her actions and, thus, to exercise an elementary form of self-direction.

*Choice and control.* Despite their readily observable commitment to instilling self-direction in their children, the Handlons and other middle-class parents also frequently structure, and thus indirectly control, the children's choices. For example, during the evening of the dancing episode, Ms. Handlon repeatedly mentioned the upcoming softball season to Melanie and encouraged her daughter, who is cool to the idea, to enroll. Although she represented the decision as Melanie's, Ms. Handlon urged the activity upon her daughter and mentioned her own concern that she not be left out:

One time when Melanie said, "I want to go ice skating," Ms. Handlon said, "Are you going to do softball this year?" Melanie said, "I don't know." Ms. Handlon said, "Remember last year, when you were upset everyone did softball and you had no one to play with?" Melanie nodded. Ms. Handlon said, "You need to let me know soon, because I have to sign you up." Melanie said, "Should I play?" Ms. Handlon said, "If you want to play. We're not going to tell you to play 'cause if you don't like it, then you'll say we told you you have to play. If you want to play, you should." After a few seconds' pause, Ms. Handlon said, "You could ask other people in the neighborhood and see if they're playing. Ask Sofia and see what she's doing."

Rather than waiting to consult her friend, Melanie agreed to play—thereby "choosing" the outcome Ms. Handlon preferred and toward which she had been patiently guiding her.

Of course, children do not always comply with parents' wishes. The critical point, however, is that in the effort to promote their children's decision-making abilities, the middle-class parents we observed frequently maneuvered to frame choices so that a particular outcome would seem attractive to their children.

Our data suggest that this indirect use of control to promote the development of self-direction is a characteristically middle-class childrearing strategy. As such, it constitutes an interesting extension of Kohn's findings.

*Organized activities: Rules and compulsion by adults.* It is not merely their children's nascent capacity for judgment and decision making that the middle-class families in our study, such as the Handlons, sought to cultivate. In addition, they attempted to foster traits such as curiosity, self-control, and creativity that may plausibly be seen as manifestations of a commitment to self-direction (Kohn, 1969, pp. 17–29). One way they did so was through the children's participation in organized leisure activities of one sort or another. Melanie, for example, takes piano lessons (privately) and flute lessons (at school), she has played on Little League and softball teams, she has been on a gymnastics team and has taken ballet lessons, she participates in Brownies (Ms. Handlon is the troop leader), and she is a member of the church choir and has a role in the church Christmas play. All of these activities offer opportunities for developing curiosity and creativity as well as for having fun. But these and similar organized leisure activities also typically entail submission to adult authority.

Melanie's participation in the church's annual Christmas pageant is a case in point. Melanie likes to perform; her parents are pleased she is in the play. They seemed to see her role as one of the Three Kings as an opportunity for her to develop artistically, socially, and religiously. But there are important ways in which the activity departed from their commitment to self-direction. During December, weekly rehearsals took place at the church. These involved a full run-through of the program, in which the children's actions were tightly controlled. Adults issued numerous directives, making their expectations clear:

They run quickly through the first few songs but pause again at the "Your Great Love Continues" number to work on the clapping. Danielle directs them to clap loudly and then yells, "You are all leaning against the wall in the back row! That wall doesn't need any help to stand. Stand up straight! Look out at the audience. You need to have them hear you." Her manner is very direct, not mean, but demanding in a serious, friendly tone.

Throughout the rehearsal, and again at the end, the children received pointers regarding behavior.

The timetable for the Saturday morning rehearsals was similar to that of a school day. The practice started at 9:00 a.m. and continued for about 2 hours. There was a "recess" of 10 minutes, followed by another 2-hour session. At the end of practice, the performers had a pizza lunch at the church. When the morning break was announced (the timing of the break was flexible and was determined by the adults), most of the children promptly fell into informal, physically active play.

On Christmas Eve, all the Handlons dressed up and went to the church to attend the service and see Melanie perform. As the start of the pageant neared, the level of tension was high; mothers who were helping out were frazzled and testy. The children had been asked to report to the church an hour before the service in order to change into their costumes and prepare for the performance. Excited and nervous, they were physically active, noisy, and unfocused. The adults attempted to assert their customary level of control, but they were met with little success:

Ms. Thomas' voice got louder and she started hollering. She sounded mad. "I WANT [other adults started going "SSHHHH," and the noise subsided significantly but was not eliminated] THE STARS OVER THERE [pointing to the back of the room], and THE ANGELS OVER HERE [pointing to the side], AND THE CITIZENS AND SHEPHERDS WHERE MRS. THOMAS IS."

With the pageant about to begin, Ms. Thomas and other mothers started grabbing children by their shoulders and moving them into position. Although intended to be fun for the children, adults were unambiguously in control of the event.

Thus, the development of self-control, creativity, and curiosity—and through them a capacity for self-direction—were certainly in keeping with middle-class parents' goals. Nevertheless, the peculiar way in which this goal was enacted in organized activities entailed the immersion of children in settings characterized by adult authority and, at times, discipline. This cannot be registered by analyses that are restricted to parental values, but is worthy of consideration.

*The Handlon case in context.* The Handlon case study raises several questions. One might

reasonably ask whether and to what degree it constitutes a window into the childrearing practices of middle-class parents more generally. Additionally, even if the case does provide insight into broader behavioral patterns, it does not confirm that the parental behaviors exhibited by middle-class parents are, in fact, motivated by a valuation of self-direction in their children. Indeed, the observed behaviors may derive from entirely different values and attitudes.

In this section, we draw on interviews with the parents of the 88 children in the full sample to address these issues. These data—although undeniably helpful—do have limits. Above all, they do not yield insight into the distinctive styles of verbal interaction observed across our three classes of families. The parents we studied did not reflect on this dimension of childrearing; language use was the epitome of a taken-for-granted form of interaction. Thus, ritual negotiations such as those in the Handlon household were not, as far as we could discern, the result of deliberate strategies that parents would think to mention during interviews. Consequently, our claim to the distinctive prevalence of this behavior among middle-class families must rest on the observational data.

When it comes to children's leisure activities, however, and the meaning they hold for parents, the interview data offer an important resource. Because these activities' salience for many families became apparent early on, the interview schedule included specific prompts. Parents were asked whether their children currently participated, or had previously participated, in a large number of organized activities. The results of mothers' responses to these questions, broken out by social class, are presented in Table 1. Within our wider sample, middle-class children clearly were more heavily involved than their working-class and poor counterparts. This finding is consistent with various recent studies that, analyzing nationally representative time-use data, demonstrate a sharp socioeconomic status gradient in the propensity to devote children's time to organized leisure (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001; Lareau & Weininger, 2008). Thus, we feel confident that Melanie Handlon was not atypical in this regard.

Resolving the question of what motivates parents to enroll children in organized activities is more complicated. Here we draw on responses to questions we posed to parents concerning what they thought about their children's organized

Table 1. *Mean Number of Organized Leisure Activities Children Participate in or Have Participated in by Social Class*

|                                      | Middle Class | Working Class | Poor |
|--------------------------------------|--------------|---------------|------|
| Organized activities                 | 5.8          | 3.3           | 2.8  |
| Items with missing data <sup>a</sup> | 2.5          | 3.0           | 2.0  |
| <i>N</i>                             | 36           | 26            | 26   |

*Note:* Organized activities include Brownies or Cub Scouts, music lessons, team sports (soccer, Little League, etc.), nonteam sports (gymnastics, karate, etc.), Tot Tumbling, dance lessons (ballet, tap, etc.), religious classes, choir, art classes, and any activity offered through a recreational center that requires formal enrollment.

<sup>a</sup>Not every respondent was asked about all of the activities that were eventually coded (though each was asked if his or her child participated in any activities not explicitly mentioned).

leisure activities and, when relevant, what they liked about them. Across classes, the majority of parents of children who participated (or had participated) cited multiple reasons why they considered these activities positive or desirable. Reasons that cut across class lines included that the children had fun in organized activities and that the parents saw these activities as an important venue for making new friends (though a handful of middle-class parents coupled this with the issue of ethnic diversity). Additionally, a few parents from each class mentioned that they saw these activities as a means of fostering self-esteem or a sense of accomplishment in their children. Parents in all classes also tended to view organized leisure activities as a setting in which their children could acquire rudimentary self-discipline.

Despite these commonalities, clear differences emerged from the interview data. Middle-class parents were distinctively likely to declare the importance of "exposing" their children to a wide variety of experiences. Thus, when queried about the significance of his daughter's participation in gymnastics and ballet, one middle-class father replied:

One of the things I think is important is just exposure. The more one can expose children to, with a watchful eye and supervision, the more creative they can be in their own thinking.

The more options they will be able to see for themselves, the more they get a sense of improved self-esteem, self-worth, and self-confidence. I think that will carry them through adulthood. It's something they can think back on as a good experience.

For these parents, "exposure" and "choice" are linked. The more varied a child's experiences, the more he or she will be compelled to evaluate "options," deciding which activities to pursue, which to abandon, and why. In this respect, the interview data quite closely echo the dynamics we observed in the Handlon household. Moreover, the benefits parents impute to decision making correspond well with Kohn's extrapolation of self-direction: One middle-class mother, for instance, noted that the positive features of her son's participation include that he "speaks up more about what he wants, about what he likes and what he doesn't like, and um, he just seems to take more responsibility now for himself versus before the activities."

Middle-class parents do occasionally offer accounts that contradict this interpretation. For example, one middle-class father, asked what he likes about his son's karate lessons, emphasized the deep sense of respect students must learn to show their teacher. Nevertheless, these cases are quite rare; they are exceptions to a dominant pattern. More notable is that among the many evaluations middle-class parents offered concerning their children's organized leisure, there were no mentions of the high level of adult control these activities frequently entailed in practice.

#### *Working-Class and Poor Families*

A parental emphasis on conformity to external authority were easily observable in the daily lives of working-class and poor children in our data. Directives were frequent. Unlike their middle-class counterparts, the working-class and poor children in our study rarely argued or attempted to negotiate with adults; instead, they typically complied silently. Some, though not all, working-class and poor parents also relied on threats of physical discipline to back up their directives. Thus, as Kohn's work implies, working-class and poor parents did not seek to draw out their children's curiosity or nurture a desire to understand how and why things happen. Nor did they work hard to

develop their children's sense of self-direction. Close observations of these families, however, revealed that the children were routinely granted a particular form of autonomy: In contrast to their middle-class counterparts, working-class and poor children had ample time for self- and peer-initiated leisure activities. Parents did not see themselves as responsible for entertaining children or for helping them occupy their nonschool time; children's play was reserved for children. The result, as Bernstein's (1975) work suggests, was a clearer boundary between adult status and child status in working-class and poor homes than in middle-class ones. This combination of conformity and autonomy—very different from what we observed in middle-class households—was readily apparent in the lives of Katie Brindle, a poor White girl, and Wendy Driver, a working-class White girl.

*Directives, not negotiation.* CiCi Brindle is a White, single mother. She reported an annual income of between \$10,000 and \$15,000, all from public assistance. She had worked intermittently throughout her life, most recently at McDonalds, and hoped to return to the labor force in the future. At the time of our study, she had just received her GED and was proud of this achievement. Ms. Brindle's three children were fathered by different men, none of whom she married. (She was briefly married at 16, but the marriage was childless.) The oldest child, Jenna, was 18; Katie, our focal child, was 9; and Melvin (nicknamed "Melmel") was 18 months. Katie's father provided a small amount of financial support (via the Department of Human Services) but was otherwise uninvolved. Jenna's father lived far away and was at most an inconsistent presence in her life. Melmel's father was involved on a fairly regular basis, taking his son for visits several times a month. Relations with extended family members were a core part of daily life. Ms. Brindle's mother, Tammy, lived nearby, and sometimes helped with the children. Ms. Brindle, Katie, and Melmel lived in a one-bedroom apartment in a run-down building in a White, working-class neighborhood. Despite keeping the apartment scrupulously clean, Ms. Brindle could not rid it of roaches, and this distressed her.

Beyond the very serious material deprivations the Brindles contended with daily, the family had been wracked by a series of crises. Ms. Brindle had been a drug user in the past, though she was clean at the time of our study.

Penny, her first child (with Jenna's father), had died of sudden infant death syndrome about 20 years prior, a tragedy that continued to upset Ms. Brindle. Jenna had been recently diagnosed as HIV positive. Katie was sexually molested 3 years prior to the study, which led to her temporary hospitalization in a psychological "child guidance" program. Still, Ms. Brindle was proud of her ability to hold everything together: "I always . . . I had the rent paid, you know, had a roof over our head and food in our stomachs." Indeed, despite all the crises, the childrearing practices Ms. Brindle pursued did not differ strikingly from those of other poor parents we observed, nor from those of the working-class parents.

Consistent with Kohn's findings, Ms. Brindle expected obedience from her children. Indeed, though she often relented when one was unwilling to follow a directive, this represented an act of surrender on her part. From time to time, the children provoked a clear-cut display of her authority. For example, as Ms. Brindle was sitting with her sister-in-law Mary one afternoon and Katie was preparing her own lunch, the following scene occurred:

When Katie finishes cooking the spaghetti she takes two pieces of white bread from a loaf which is on top of the refrigerator. She brings the pot over and sits next to me on the bed. She puts the (hot) pot on the bed. Katie dips the bread in the sauce and eats it. Melmel comes over and gets up on the bed. Katie breaks off a piece of bread, dips it in the sauce and hands it to Melmel. He gets half of it in his mouth and half of it around his face. Cici at this point is in the kitchen. Aunt Mary says to Katie, "Don't give him that, and sit on the floor." Aunt Mary says this in a harsh tone. Katie ignores Aunt Mary and continues eating and giving Melmel bread. About a minute later Cici looks back from the kitchen and starts screaming at Katie, "Go in the kitchen." Mary says to Katie, "I told you so."

Importantly, neither Ms. Brindle nor Aunt Mary offered any explanation for their directives (e.g., the bed might get dirty); likewise, Katie made no attempt to justify her actions (e.g., Melmel is hungry).

Ms. Brindle rarely justified any exercise of her authority. When she did, she typically invoked her positional status. For example, one Saturday after a birthday party at which she received a small amount of cash from friends, Katie stated

her intent to walk to the store and spend some of it.

Jenna: MOM!! Katie's going out with her money.

Ms. Brindle comes into the living room.

Ms. Brindle [addressing Katie]: Give it to me.

Unlike Melanie Handlon, Katie did not attempt to negotiate with her mother; she was angry but silent. Ms. Brindle reiterated that Katie did not have her permission and then offered a brief explanation: "You can't take your money out." Katie said nothing and her mother elaborated, "I have to be with you when you spend it." When Katie, wound up from the birthday party, was still not responsive, her mother acted:

Ms. Brindle: Give it to me. (Ms. Brindle leans over the loveseat in which Katie is sitting and wrestles the money away from her.)

This led to another exchange, in which Katie asked for an explanation:

Katie [upset]: WHY?! It's my money. They gave it to me. They didn't give it to you.

Ms. Brindle: I have to be with you when you spend it. You can't just be spending it.

Katie [defiant and angry]: It's my money! It's my money!

In the final exchange, Ms. Brindle simply pulled rank:

Katie [still on the couch, staring at a magazine]: Why can't I spend it?

Ms. Brindle [answering from the kitchen]: Because I said so and I'm your mother.

Katie began to cry.

We observed Katie plead, pout, and cry occasionally when she was unhappy with her mother's mandates. We never saw her initiate or take part in the complex rituals of justification and negotiation characteristic of the Handlons, however. As in the Brindle household, in poor and working-class families we frequently witnessed parents issue directives and children follow them. On the unusual occasions when these children did argue with their parents, the conflict differed from the middle-class interactions we observed. The children did not attempt to raise an alternative to the action endorsed by their parents (as Melanie Handlon did when she asked to move the laundry basket)

or seek to justify their position with convincing reasons (as Tommy Handlon did when he wanted to make juice). Thus, as Kohn's work suggests, our data show far more emphasis on compliance with authority figures in working-class and poor homes than in middle-class ones.

*Autonomy from adults: Children's leisure worlds.* Despite their parents' preference for conformity, working-class and poor children in the study enjoyed more independence than the middle-class children did in their daily lives. Because their parents did not view life as a series of "teachable moments" ripe for developing their children's reasoning abilities, working-class and poor children were not subjected to the constant indirect manipulation we observed in middle-class families. For example, after school, Katie typically came home, fixed a snack, and then decided what to do. Sometimes she rode her bike; other times she watched television or played with Melmel. Ms. Brindle, unlike Ms. Handlon, did not present Katie with a menu of choices or encourage her to select particular activities.

Indeed, because the working-class and poor children spent relatively little time in organized activities, they tended to have long stretches of unstructured leisure time. And, because parents did not see themselves as responsible for entertaining their children or developing their leisure interests, these youngsters engaged in more self-initiated play than we observed among their middle-class counterparts. The result is that although the parental commitment to conformity Kohn identified clearly shaped childrearing practices in working-class and poor families, parents appeared not to apply this value in some areas of daily life, including children's leisure time.

One of Katie's favorite leisure activities was to put on performances for her extended family. Ms. Brindle stated, "She loves music and she likes to put on shows for you, put on costumes and dance and sing." Katie had been staging impromptu shows since she was 4 or 5 years old. They frequently included her cousin Amy. "They've got ballet outfits they'll put on," Ms. Brindle explained, "and they'll put music on and they'll pretend they're singing, you know, and they'll dance to the music. Mostly it's like rap songs." Importantly, both mother and daughter appeared to view these performances as more celebratory than educative. According to

Ms. Brindle, Katie "puts on the calendar when there is going to be a show"; usually, they occur on "weekends . . . or if it's a holiday or somebody's birthday, she'll say, 'I want to put on a show, that will be my present to you.'" The audience consisted entirely of adult relatives: "It will be me and my brother and my mom, their Grandmom, just family." The adults dutifully assembled, but in contrast to the enthusiasm Ms. and Mr. Handlon demonstrated for Melanie's pageant, they did not offer any special support for Katie's passion for performing. Ms. Brindle and her adult relatives generally treated Katie's skits as insignificant.

When asked what she thought Katie "gets out of putting on these shows," Ms. Brindle responded only that her child "feels good about herself." Prompted to elaborate, Ms. Brindle said Katie "feels she's getting attention." When the interviewer ventured that Katie was "very creative," Ms. Brindle agreed but immediately steered the conversation back to her daughter's need "to be at the center of attention." Beyond this, she could only be coaxed into saying that Katie's shows were "cute." Thus, it is clear that Ms. Brindle did not view the performances as having a developmental function. Rather, she saw them simply as a form of play—one that was properly child initiated and belonged to the world of children. Katie's shows were perceived as an extension of her other leisure pursuits, which included watching television, playing video games, riding her bike, and "hanging out" with neighborhood kids. For this reason, Ms. Brindle and the other adults did not feel compelled to interrupt whatever they were doing to coach Katie or cultivate her creativity. Her performances were a form of play permitted to intrude into the world of adults on designated occasions, when they did not interfere with more important events.

Her schedule did not approach that of Melanie Handlon's, but Katie did participate in some organized leisure activities. She belonged to a church youth group that met every Friday night. Group members sang, learned Bible verses, and played games. She was also in her school's choir, which met weekly for 1 hour. Unlike Melanie, Katie initiated involvement in these activities herself. She learned of the church group from neighborhood friends and the choir through school. (She wanted to take ballet but finances did not permit it.) Her mother was generally enthusiastic about Katie's participation, in

part because her daughter enjoyed the activities, but also, in the case of the church group, because Ms. Brindle felt it helped teach Katie “what’s right and what’s wrong.” When queried further, she said the program taught Katie to be “patient and respectful.” The only additional significance she ascribed to the organized activities was that they enabled her daughter to make new friends and to become less shy. Thus, for her, Katie’s activities were important for reasons that differed from those the Handlons attached to their daughter’s activities.

*Adults’ worlds, children’s worlds.* At the time of our study, Wendy Driver was in the fourth grade. Wendy’s White, working-class family included her 12-year-old brother Willie, her infant stepsister Valerie, her mother Debbie, and Debbie’s boyfriend Mack (Valerie’s father). The family had a combined income between \$40,000 and \$50,000. Debbie worked full-time as a secretary for a small private company. Mack had a unionized job as a custodian and handyman, also with a small, private company. Both had a high school degree.

When adults in the Driver household talked, they frequently ordered the children into another room—not for secrecy, but simply to be left alone. The children usually went elsewhere and played together. In this way, the boundary between the world of adults and that of children was continually reinforced. When adults and children interacted, their behavior was much more similar to that which we observed in the Brindle household than in the Handlon family. There was an emphasis on conformity, and Debbie and Mack issued directives. The children typically complied silently. When the children did not obey, the adults did not appear inclined or willing to negotiate. A typical example occurred one evening as Willie, using the TV remote control to flip through channels, stopped on an Easter Sunday service:

Debbie [angry]: Change the channel.

Willie: It’s almost over.

Debbie [yelling]: CHANGE THE CHANNEL.

Willie changed the channel. He then flipped back to the first channel. Debbie did not notice at first because she was playing with Valerie. When she did notice, she reacted at high volume:

Debbie [screaming]: I TOLD YOU TO CHANGE THE CHANNEL.

Willie: It’s 8:56. It’s almost over. I want to watch cartoons.

Debbie grabbed the remote control from him and changed the channel.

Wendy participated in more organized activities than did Katie but fewer than Melanie did: She was enrolled in dance lessons and religious classes (referred to as “CCD”) and was a member of the school choir. Indeed, compared to other working-class children, her nonschool time was relatively heavily scheduled. In this, her daily life bore a partial resemblance to that of Melanie Handlon. The meaning assigned to Wendy’s activities, however, seemed closer to what we heard in conversations with Ms. Brindle. This similarity was apparent in an exchange Wendy initiated regarding the levels of sin:

Wendy [addressing Willie]: Do you know what mortal sin is?

Willie: No.

Wendy [addressing her mother]: Do you know what mortal sin is?

Debbie: What is it?

Wendy [addressing Mack]: Do you know what it is?

Mack: No.

Debbie: Tell us what it is. You’re the one who went to CCD.

Wendy: It’s when you know something’s wrong and you do it anyway.

No one acknowledged Wendy’s answer. The adults looked at her while she explained mortal sin and then looked back at the television. Unlike middle-class parents, Wendy’s mother and her boyfriend did not seek to draw Wendy into a didactic exchange through which they could cultivate a capacity for independent moral reasoning.

In sum, consistent with Kohn’s findings, we saw ample evidence of working-class and poor parents valuing conformity to external authority. There was a frequent use of directives in daily life. Unlike the Handlons, parents did not negotiate with their children or treat routine conversations as opportunities to cultivate reasoning skills. Rather, working-class and poor parents typically sought to delimit two zones of family life. In one, adult authority was expected to prevail uncontested. Here, the necessities of life—food, money, and so forth—were central. The other realm

was one in which adults were generally incidental and children could exercise their own initiative, make their own decisions, and pursue their own preferences. Thus, our analysis revealed a complex picture. The parental emphasis on conformity was accompanied by a form of autonomy, especially in leisure. This autonomy does not resemble the notion of self-direction—with its focus on “internal” processes of judgment and decision—that Kohn associates with middle-class childrearing. Nevertheless, it places limits on the valuation of conformity to external authority, which for Kohn is the most pronounced hallmark of working-class childrearing.

*The Brindle and Driver cases in context.* As with the negotiations that frequently took place in middle-class families, the preponderance of parental directives in working-class and poor families remained largely unnoticed. Consequently, we cannot go beyond our observational data in assessing the character of verbal interactions in these households. To evaluate the distinctiveness of the Brindle and Driver cases and to explore the parents’ underlying motives and beliefs, we again turned to the interview data as it pertained to children’s leisure activities.

As Table 1 shows, working-class and poor children participated in substantially fewer organized activities than did their middle-class counterparts. Notably, however, all three children profiled here were involved in at least one church-run activity. This was not anomalous: Activities of this sort were common across class categories. Nevertheless, the interview data suggested that the meaning these activities held for parents did vary. Working-class and poor parents tended to acknowledge the explicitly religious dimension of an activity like the choir, whereas their middle-class counterparts typically viewed choir primarily as a musical endeavor. Moreover, working-class and poor parents were less reticent about the benefits that they felt accrued from religious instruction—primarily, the inculcation of a normative code. Thus, in addition to making numerous references to the importance of having their children “learn about the Bible,” working-class and poor parents sometimes emphasized that church-based activities instill “Christian values” or teach children about the Ten Commandments. One working-class

mother, asked what she liked about her child’s Sunday school, responded, “That they learn the basics and the principles of Christianity and the Bible and about how you should live morally. Basically, that it teaches the principles of how you should conduct yourself with others.” Analogous remarks were quite rare among middle-class parents, being limited to a father’s mention of “values” and “moral character” and a mother’s reference to the importance of “God and Jesus Christ and all of that.”

To be sure, working-class and poor parents sometimes stressed the importance of letting their children “choose” activities. But again, the meaning of this term was not the same as for their middle-class counterparts. Working-class and poor parents generally did not connect decision-making skills to “exposure” (i.e., to the goal of widening their children’s experience); hence, they did not view choice as a form of self-exploration. Choice was important simply to the extent that it helped ensure that children enjoyed their leisure activities and thus that they would “stick with” them.

## DISCUSSION

Within the study of family life, it is widely agreed that children’s life chances are significantly stratified, but there is limited understanding of how the parents’ social location shapes family dynamics. In light of this, Melvin Kohn’s persistent attention to the effects social class exerts on the institution of the family has made an enduring contribution. Among the many illuminating findings that Kohn has presented over the years, his well-documented arguments concerning class-specific variation in parental childrearing values remain some of the most widely discussed. In this paper, we attempted to extend our knowledge of the importance of these value differences. Drawing on qualitative data we analyzed how parental commitments to conformity or self-direction are enacted in daily life. Our results imply that, at the level of actual behavior, it is implausible to assume a simple one-to-one correspondence between class and either conformity or self-direction. Rather, the relations between value commitments and behavior are complex and may entail paradoxical pathways.

This was clearest in our examination of middle-class childrearing. Despite the value

middle-class parents accord to self-direction, in their effort to instill it, they often employed antithetical means. We observed these parents frequently exercising a relatively subtle, indirect form of control over their children. Hoping to develop curiosity and self-control, they often placed their children in settings that entailed high levels of adult authority. Conversely, we found that, consonant with Kohn's findings, working-class and poor parents tended to value conformity to external authority for their children. Children's subjection to adult authority, however, was limited in these families, and much of their leisure time transpired in a zone free from adults and their imperatives. Here, children could exercise initiative and make their own decisions.

The image of childrearing that emerges from our data is multifaceted. The relatively intricate fusions of value commitments and behavior that the data reveal remind us that the process of enactment is rarely simple. It has its own logic, in the sense that particular means are typically employed (e.g., organized leisure activities) and particular rituals followed (e.g., parent-child negotiation). Thus, following Luster, Rhoades, and Haas (1989), we emphasize that the relation between parental values and parental behaviors is one that requires empirical investigation in its own right. Only with sustained attention to this relation will social scientists be able to better grasp the consequences of social stratification for family life.

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