



Family Focus On...

Families and Social Class

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Unequal Childhoods: Inequalities in the Rhythms of Daily Life

by Annette Lareau, PhD, Department of Sociology, University of Maryland

The intersection of race and class in American life is an important but often vexing subject for sociologists. The power of social class is often obscured by the visibility of race. I wrote *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (University of California Press, 2003) in part because I wanted to make class real by showing how it works in everyday life. I hoped that by capturing the day-to-day rhythms of life in different kinds of families—those of middle-class, working-class, and poor whites and African Americans—I could help bring the seemingly intractable problem of inequality into clearer focus.

Most of the 88 families my research assistants and I interviewed during the first stage of research had children in the third or fourth grade in elementary schools in a large northeastern city and its suburbs. From this initial pool, we selected twelve families, six African American and six white, for more intensive study. Nearly every day for three weeks we spent time, usually a few hours, with each family. We went to baseball games, church services, family reunions, grocery stores, beauty parlors and barbershops. We even stayed overnight with most of the families. We saw siblings squabble and heard parents yell. We joined kids as

they sat around watching TV and as they played outside in the yard or the street. By the standards of social science research, this was an unusually intensive study.

What we found was that although all parents want their children to be happy and to thrive, social class makes a very substantial difference in how this universal goal is met. Middle-class parents promote what I call *concerted cultivation*. They actively foster their children's talents, opinions, and skills by enrolling the children in organized activities, reasoning with them, and closely monitoring their

experiences in institutions such as schools. The focus is squarely on children's individual development. As a result of this pattern of concerted cultivation, children gain an *emerging sense of entitlement*. Most of the middle-class families in the study were extremely busy; this pattern held for white and African American middle-class families. Children attend soccer games, go on Girl Scout trips, do homework, and go to birthday parties; parents need to arrange these activities as well as get children there and back. Despite the busy schedule, most parents worked full time and some had job-related

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overnight travel. In addition to meeting their workplace responsibilities, parents had to manage the details of family life: they had to go grocery shopping, prepare dinner, do laundry, monitor homework, oversee children's showers, and participate in bedtime rituals. I detail in the book what children's schedules mean for family life. In describing the middle class, I use the term "the frenetic family." Things are so hectic that the house sometimes seems to be little more than a holding space for the brief periods between activities.

The differences we observed between these middle-class families and those of the working class and poor families are striking. Parents in working-class and poor families promote what I call *the accomplishment of natural growth*. These parents care for their children, love them, and set limits for them, but within these boundaries, they allow the children to grow spontaneously. Children do not have organized activities. Instead, they play outside with cousins and siblings; they watch television. Parents use directives rather than reasoning with children. And children generally negotiate institutional life, including their day-to-day school experiences, on their own. The working-class and poor parents in the study often were very distrustful of contacts with "the school" and healthcare facilities. They were fearful that professionals in these institutions might "come and take my kids away." Rather than an emerging sense of entitlement, children in these families developed an *emerging sense of constraint*. Working-class and poor families struggled with severe economic shortages (including lack of food in the poor families) that often led to additional labor or complexity (long bus rides, missed appointments), but the pace of their daily life was much less hectic than that of the middle-class families.

Unquestionably, the families we studied differed in terms of how they raised their children. But are these differences important—do they really matter? Neither the approach of concerted cultivation nor the accomplishment of natural growth is without flaws. Both have strengths and weaknesses. Middle-class children, for example, are often exhausted, have vicious fights with siblings, and do not have as much contact with their extended families as working-class and poor children. But when children are in settings such as schools and healthcare facilities, middle-class parents' strategy of concerted cultivation complies much more closely with the current standards of professionals than does the accomplishment of natural growth strategy that working-class and poor parents rely on. Middle-class parents routinely make special requests of teachers, asking, for example, that they provide their children with individualized instruction. These parents expect the institution to accommodate them, and this expectation typically is met. Middle-class children are taught to ask doctors questions and to feel that they have the right to challenge people in positions of authority. Thus, the data suggest that middle-class children gain advantages, including potential benefits in the world of work, from the experience of concerted cultivation. Working-class and poor children are not taught these life skills, and thus do not gain the associated benefits. In short, class matters.

What about race? We found that in terms of children's time use, parents' methods of talking to children, and parents' interactions with schools and other institutions, African American middle-class children had much more in common with white middle-class children than with African American poor or working-class children. Still, race *does*

matter in other respects: most of the children lived in racially segregated neighborhoods, middle-class African American parents complained of race-based difficulties in the workplace, and African American middle-class parents were very worried about their children being exposed to racial insensitivity at school. These parents also tried to promote a positive racial identity for their children (for example, by taking them to a predominantly middle-class African American church). But in terms of the overall rhythm of children's family lives, and the ways in which parents address their own and their children's concerns, class emerged as much more important than race. Other studies also show substantial divisions between middle-class African Americans and working-class and poor African Americans. The findings presented here, and in much greater detail in *Unequal Childhoods*, are based on an intensive study of only twelve families. Can we trust these results to tell us anything of significance? I believe that we can. The book's conclusions support established findings in social science research, which, using statistical techniques and nationally representative data, have shown important differences in how parents raise children. Rather than using numbers, *Unequal Childhoods* uses the stories of real families to highlight important social patterns. Moreover, American society is in a time of change. Children are being raised differently today than in earlier decades: middle-class children have more organized activities than in the 1950s and 1960s, for example. This shift has important implications for family life that our research helps expose by providing detailed insight into intimate details of daily life in families with young children. It gives us a chance to step back and reflect on how we are spending our time in family life as parents, and how we are choosing to raise our children. It also reminds us of the fact — all too often neglected — that there are important



Annette Lareau, PhD



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Professor as Student: What my Undergraduate Students have Taught me about Social Class

by Stephen R. Marks, Professor of Sociology, University of Maine

In recent years I've asked students in my undergraduate Microsociology course to come to terms with their social-class origins in a term paper. They borrow concepts from Annette Lareau's *Unequal Childhoods* and Julie Bettie's *Women without Class* and they write personal narratives in which they press these concepts into service. I love the exercise. I get to see our student majors in their family context, and I learn a wealth of privileged detail about them that would otherwise remain hidden from my awareness. My students emerge with a richer view of their own identities. They learn how to discourse about social class, and they begin to see themselves as *classed* subjects rather than simply a bunch of individuals.

They start with Lareau, who neatly summarizes her work elsewhere in this newsletter. A beauty of her research is its utter accessibility, as she lays out her material with broad brushstrokes and bold categories. *Natural growth* is the way of parents and kids in working-class and poor (wc) families; *concerted cultivation* is the approach for parents and kids in middle-class (mc) families. Spontaneous, child-organized activities (typically in the company of siblings and cousins) are what wc kids do

after school; adult-organized and adult-managed activities are what mc kids do. Non-negotiable directives and scant focus on cognitive and reasoning skills are the approach of wc parents; verbal negotiation and an intense cultivation of cognitive skills and language use are favored by mc parents. And retreat from (and suspicion of) middle-class institutions are found among wc parents, whereas active manipulation of these institutions for their children's benefit are found among mc parents. The outcome of these processes is a *constrained self* in the typical wc kid and an *entitled self* in the typical mc kid.

I ask my students to think back to age 10, the age of Lareau's target children (yes, this is not ideal science; retrospective accounts are suspect). I caution them to begin this exercise with the recognition that here they are, sitting in a college classroom, primed to graduate from a four-year university program. Regardless of their origins, they are riding a middle-class train, which means that somewhere along the way they must

have acquired enough middle-class cultural capital to get on board. Exactly how that happened is the challenge of the term paper.

Earnestly, my students stretch to fit themselves to these concepts, and many of them do so splendidly. Most of them wind up straddling the fence, however, suggesting that in some ways their upbringing was a matter of *concerted cultivation* while in other ways it more closely approximated the model of *natural growth*. Very few students report the entire array of features that typically cluster together within Lareau's typology, and there is enormous

variation across students regarding which elements of their background match up to the model and which do not.

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For example, Jane's involvement in adult-organized activities—she often rushed frenetically from one to the other—could be right out of Lareau. But many other students recall far more spontaneous child-organized activity on their street or neighborhood, with little involvement or input from adults. Several of them report playing with nearby cousins almost every day, a pattern that Lareau found to be more typical within working-class families.

Regarding cognitive development, again I found a lot of variation. Jane recalls: "My mother would read novels to us every night before we went to bed, and we looked forward to it all day." She writes of conversations "always going on" in her family and of constantly being encouraged "to use bigger words." She recalls heated and contentious verbal negotiations with

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differences across social groups in the contours of childhood.

The arguments and evidence in *Unequal Childhoods* also point us toward new directions for social science research. The study suggests that while African American middle-class families do face some child-rearing problems that have no counterpart in white middle-class families, African American parents draw on a set of generic

class resources to manage these problems. We can do better research and gain a deeper understanding of the intersection of race and class by showing how all families draw on class-based resources as they negotiate their daily lives. Put differently, we need to move beyond studying variables; it's time to focus on families.

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her parents”: “Whatever made me think that I could talk back to the people that brought me into this world and treat them with such disrespect? It had to have been a sense of entitlement.” In contrast, Felicia’s story suggests an approach to cognitive development that was very different from Jane’s. “At my school,” she writes, “we were forced to take a book out of the library every week and read it. At home, my mom refused to fudge the forms unless I actually read the book and she had to see me doing it, and she refused to answer anything other than ‘because you have to’ when I begged the question ‘why.’ After a while I came to really enjoy reading, but all the critical thinking and language skills I developed weren’t from home and definitely weren’t from my friends. My mom never asked what I was reading or what it was about. I think she was just concerned that I read because of the importance of it in school.” Felicia recalls little in her upbringing that resembled the tendency in middle-class homes of children being catered to and treated as being special. “My mom often treated my world as ‘lesser’ than her adult world. It was a repeated process with a variety of things, and most definitely furthered a ‘constrained-me.’ For the longest time, particularly later on in high school, my self-esteem was and remained fairly low because I couldn’t get past that thought.”

Lareau’s account of middle-class parents being ever-ready to intervene in institutions on their children’s behalf likewise finds uneven support among my students. Matthew’s experience confirms the pattern, and he writes of an interesting variation. He recalls discussions with his parents about frustrations he was having within this or that activity, and his parents would then coach him about how he might intervene on his own behalf: “I wanted to play first base on my baseball team my fifth grade year. My parents and I talked about how I could approach the coach before the game and explain that I had played first base on my farm league team and would really like to try it. Their interest and rehearsal of me talking with the coach enabled me to articulate what I was going to say and how I was going to say it. These types of rehearsals followed me into the future. I would find myself thinking about what I was going

to say to a teacher or coach when I was not pleased with what was going on. In high school and even today, I feel confident in asking for certain changes or explanations in my grades. This confidence develops from a sense of entitlement that I deserve answers and accommodations to my personal needs.” In contrast, Jane’s parents didn’t quite fit the intervention and entitlement mold. She sometimes felt they were “intimidated by people with a high education or who had a lot of power, such as doctors,” and she reports that she too carries this legacy of feeling “intimidated by people who carry a lot of power.” “I am almost afraid they are looking down on me because I am not as educated.” Entitlement in Jane’s case seems to be mixed with more than a modicum of constraint—middle-class patterns mixed with elements that are held to be more often present among the working class and poor.



The place of extended family in some of my students’ upbringing likewise muddies some of the patterns in Lareau’s broad brushstrokes. Unlike most or all of Lareau’s middle-class families, who rarely had any kin within a short drive, some of my students report regular, even daily interaction with kin. Marlene, for example, recalls that her extended family “greatly helped my parents create the middle-class environment and benefits that I came to know and the ‘entitled self’ that I was shaped into.” She adds, “I was read to constantly as a young child. I remember vividly my parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins reading to me.” Sylvia offers a similar account of kin involvement, one that is tied to both her organized activities and her cognitive cultivation: “It was not just my parents who were involved in my life,” she writes. “I remember my grandparents (both sets), aunts and uncles, and cousins were all very important. They would go watch my baseball games, my clarinet and choir recitals, and school plays. Any event

that I was a part of, my whole family was usually there. I think it was a lot easier because they all live on my dirt road or within five minutes of me. My brother and I have our own bedroom

at our grandparents’ house, and I remember I would sleep there as often as I could. Whenever I did, my grandmother would read books to me, play games, and put puzzles together—all of which I think helped to contribute to my language use.”

Here we have a few exemplars of some social-class origins of students in a Micro-sociology class at the University of Maine. Most of them grew up in Maine, in small towns and little villages rather than the urban milieu in which Lareau’s families were located. That may make a big difference in how social-class patterns shake out. Moreover, the fact that all these young adults will graduate from a four-year institution of higher education does not portend the same social-class destination for all of them. Some will replicate the working-class origins of their parents despite their education. Some will wind up in low-level managerial positions with very modest incomes. A few will go on to graduate school. And several will no doubt wind up in flashy careers with six-figure incomes. Perhaps the differences in outcomes will all come down to how closely their families approximated Lareau’s basic patterns after all. Perhaps the students who will barely maintain middle-class status (if at all) will be the ones with many elements of working-class “natural growth” mixed into their upbringing, while the ones who become the bigger achievers will be those with the most consistent “concerted cultivation.” What matters is not so much how “right” the model is in all its specifics but the fact that we have the model, plain and simple. Because of scholars like Lareau, we are now discoursing about social class in a way that is new and exciting.

More information about Dr. Marks, a new NCFR Fellow, is available in the NCFR Fellows article in this issue of Report. He can be reached at Stephen_Marks@umit.maine.edu



Stephen R. Marks, PhD

African American Family Strategies for Moving Into and Staying In the Middle Class

by Anne Bubriski, Southern Connecticut University and Lara Descartes, University of Connecticut

Racism at every level of society has made attaining middle class status difficult for African Americans. Prior to the Civil Rights Acts of the 1960s, slavery and then legal segregation made it nearly impossible for Blacks to work in professional positions or to acquire property, investments, and other assets. Despite the hurdles facing them, through persistence and hard work, some African Americans have been able to move into the middle class. The Black middle class now is a growing population that is just beginning to receive scholarly attention. Most research on African Americans has focused on the Black urban poor, which has made the Black middle class relatively invisible to both scholars and media. The qualitative research discussed here was initiated to explore some of the ways African Americans have mobilized to move either themselves or their children into the middle class. We found common themes in the stories our interview participants told that included a focus upon the nuclear family, geographic mobility, parental stress upon education, and parents who worked multiple jobs to ensure middle class lives for their children.

The data were collected by the second author, who conducted in-depth interviews with twelve Black women living in the Greater Hartford, Connecticut area. Participants self-identified as middle class. Most had college educations, or at least some college experience, and most owned their own homes. Only one, however, spoke of any assets beyond home ownership. Interview questions were open-ended and developed primarily from an interview guide used in a prior study on race and support exchange. Questions asked about the women's family, educational, and employment experiences, and their social support networks. Demographic information also

was collected. Participants were recruited via advertisements posted in community venues such as Black-owned businesses, and subsequent snowball sampling.

The twelve women's accounts showed a great deal of thematic overlap, discussed below. While all participants defined themselves as middle class, most grew up in working class families, and thus had a great deal to say about how they and their families had managed the transition, revealing both their practices and their ideologies.

Support Exchange and Independence

Support exchange among African Americans has been well-researched, starting with Carol Stack's seminal 1974 ethnographic study. This, like many subsequent pieces, focused on urban poor Blacks and highlighted extensive reliance among family members and fictive kin. More recent studies, though, have raised questions about the ability of poorer African Americans to participate in such kin-based exchange. Poverty may reduce the resources available to be shared with other family members and therefore, the poorer the kin members are, the less likely they may be to share with or support other kin members. For middle class families, there is a similar debate. Mary Pattillo-McCoy, for example, argued that "families keep alive a culturally based emphasis on the extended family in order to maintain an economically middle-class standard of living." However, Elizabeth Higginbotham and Lynn Weber found that middle class Blacks who received

support got it primarily from nuclear family members. This was especially true if it was assistance for the purpose of higher education.

Likewise, the women in our study relied mainly on nuclear family members if they needed financial assistance. Monetary support, however, was kept to a minimum and seemed used only to advance a nuclear family member's life situation. This financial help was given, for example, to help buy or repair a home or car, and/or get an education. One woman stated about her parents that "if I was going back to school they would help me out. Basically, anything

that can help me prosper [they would help me with]." Another participant discussed how she helped her mother: "My mom just bought a house maybe a year ago and since she's just the only person that's working and I've been working, I've been giving her some money towards the house."

Typical middle class markers include college education, homeownership, mobility, and white collar careers. Systemic racism and unequal access to resources have provided a very different context for Black Families than for White Families...

This familial monetary support helped individuals either maintain middle class status or move up the socioeconomic ladder into middle class status. The majority of participants, however, stressed self-sufficiency and independence, rather than reliance on others. When asked about adult children and parents helping each other, for example, one participant replied:

If it's not a real emergency, if you just want to take your paycheck and live widely, I don't want to help you. Because I really believe in there comes a time when you should really take care of yourself ... I want to

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be independent ... I mean if the need arrives where I can't take care of myself, I would more count on like, fortunately the State of Connecticut offers I think like, through Medicare or whatever... So I would look toward those agencies to help me help myself, more than my kids.

Thus, this woman affirmed a value that adult children and elders should be independent as much as possible and only rely on support from others in cases of emergency. Another participant similarly stated that adult children “should be independent. I think that once you reach a certain age and you can do for yourself, you should do for yourself. I don't think you should always depend on your parents to be there.”

Geographic Mobility

The ability to be mobile may enable middle class status. As noted, some past research has indicated the strength and interreliance of African American extended families. However, some have argued that as Blacks begin to move into to the middle class, they might need to remove themselves from sharing resources with extensive extended family in order to maintain those resources. Stack, for example, observed that Blacks seeking to rise above poverty can find it difficult to save money. Any finances obtained frequently are used to help other members of the kin network. Therefore, moving up the socioeconomic ladder may require that a person move away from the local kin network in order to save their individual monetary resources for their own use. Supporting this, Harriet McAdoo's study participants reported that “in order to make it out of poverty, they, in essence, had to cut themselves off from their families”.

Our interviewees did discuss a pattern of geographic mobility corresponding to their class mobility. Most of those we spoke with described how their families were scattered across various states. One participant in describing her family said they were spread throughout the states of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Mississippi, and Connecticut. There did seem to be a correspondence to decreased exchange with geographically remote kin. Moreover, many explained that their parents moved from the South to

New England or the Midwest. The cited reasons for leaving the South unanimously were for work opportunities. This was likely a significant factor aiding class mobility due to the systemic and often overt racism in the southern states. Migrating to northern or Midwestern states seems to have provided more job and housing opportunities for Black families, especially in the post-World War II industrial boom.

Education

Obtaining a higher education is a significant factor in the mobility process and middle class attainment. Studies have demonstrated the need for a college education to work in white collar occupations. Higginbotham and Weber assert, “Lacking inherited wealth or other resources, those working-class people who attain middle-class standing do so primarily by obtaining a college education and entering a professional, managerial, or administrative occupation.” Obtaining this education has a lot to do with parent involvement, educational expectations, and strong relationships with children. Selcuk Sirin and Lauren Rogers-Sirin found that these factors, in both single parent and dual parent families, corresponded to high levels of academic performance among middle class Black youth.

Likewise, among our interview participants, education was a prominent theme in their lives, one that they and their parents had stressed. Most of the women either possessed college degrees or had attended college at some point. Most, regardless if they were from single or dual parent families, spoke of their parents' dogged insistence that they do well in school, and if they themselves were parents, described how they in turn focused upon their children's educations. The women's stories recounted how education and its importance was hammered home. A few mentioned that this had been the case particularly because they were female; their parents had wanted them as Black women to be able to support themselves comfortably, if need be. Many also spoke of how their parents had helped them financially

with school, and if they had children, how they did this as well. The goal of this assistance was to enable their educational attainment as a means toward achieving independence. One woman, for example, said of her own child:

I know how important an education is. I want [my daughter] to be able to focus that time on studying ... So I mean if I could make it so that all she had to do was go to college, she would have a car, because I would pay for it. She wouldn't have to pay insurance. I would want these four years to be the time she could devote to studying ... then when you start working, then you can take care of yourself.

Obtaining a higher education is a significant factor in the mobility process and middle class attainment.

One interview participant connected her ideas about helping adult children with education to her own parents' practices:

Of course parents help support children through school. My parents put me and my oldest brother through school. Even though maybe we had loans that we had to repay, initially they made a lot of up front payments and did a lot of the initial stuff.

Another woman interviewed similarly linked her ideas about supporting her children's educations to her own history: “I would help them financially as much as I could, if they needed to come back home and live home and stay home as long as possible, they could, because that was offered to me.” These sentiments are significant because they describe how middle class status is transferred across generations. These interviewees are discussing strategies that likely will enable inter-generational class stability. Pattillo-McCoy discussed how many young adults from middle class families do not finish college due to the high costs of living and “room and board” charges universities often require. It seems it may be important for many Black young adults to live at home while attending college in order to secure that class standing for the future.

Employment

High educational achievement is the usual pathway to professional careers, which in

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turn can give economic and class stability. However, because of institutional and structural racism, numerous well-educated and experienced Black males are either underemployed or unemployed. Many Black middle class families stay middle class specifically because there are two wages to enable it. McAdoo reported, for example, that “[Black wives’] income was not needed to stay above the poverty level, but instead was used to maintain middle-income status ... Maternal employment and dual-career families are intimate components of Black family stability.”

Our interviews, however, revealed not only dual income families, but triple or even quadruple income families. Many of the interviewees talked about themselves and/or their own parents working multiple jobs. The money enabled the families to remain middle class, or, if they were working class, to provide the resources allowing their children to become middle class and independent. Despite their multiple jobs, these parents remained intimately involved in their children’s lives. We labeled this pattern “superhero parenting.” One interview participant describes her father:

He worked at the hospital as a night EMT. So he would work 11-7, and get home late, then come home in the morning, get us ready for school, and then when we got home from school, we would wake him up for his 3-11 job. He did it for years, for years. He did it at least eight years because . . . we both went to Catholic school, and then from that we paid for college.

This participant’s father was diabetic and unfortunately, she attributed his death to his extended lack of sleep and exhausting hours. Other parents also overextended themselves to meet the demands of middle class living. One woman explained how her father stretched his finances in order for his daughter to “fit in” with the upper middle class status of her classmates:

When she went to Fairfield, it was a different crowd. And he didn’t want her thinking that she couldn’t keep up with them, so he gave her a credit card. Where so that if she needed something she could get it and not feel different from, I don’t want to say spoiled brats

that went there, but the kids were more, I don’t know, better off or well off.

These descriptions of parents placing their health and financial stability at risk in order to fit the “middle class mold” and to ensure comfortable livings for future generations paint these parents as superheroes indeed.

Conclusion

The women interviewed for this study shared some common experiences in the ways they and their families reached and/or maintained middle class status. In our sample, social support networks tended to be concentrated among nuclear family members. Mobility, a hallmark of the middle class, also was a characteristic of our interviewees and their families, as people moved wherever jobs could be obtained. The majority of the women described their families as being quite spread out, whether within one state or across the country. They also discussed involved, hands-on parenting, in which parents focused intensely on their children’s education, making sure that the children succeeded. Sometimes this also meant working multiple jobs in order to finance the lifestyles parents preferred for their children.

Wealth shapes and influences patterns of class mobility and financial stability. Only one of the participants in our study discussed having any family assets beyond their home. Albeit home equity and home ownership are important, possessing only this form of wealth leaves many families vulnerable to economic hardships. Equity in property is not considered a liquid asset. Thus, when financial difficulties arise, families with solely this form of wealth may not have immediate access to monetary resources,

compared to those families that have significant savings and/or other liquid assets.

Discrepancy in wealth is important to our study because it may significantly affect the way Black middle class families exchange resources, engage in mobility patterns, and provide for future generations. In particular, it is likely that the lack of wealth in the Black middle class families of which our interviewees were members contributed to parents’ decisions to work multiple jobs simultaneously in order to provide economic stability for their families. Most middle class White families do not find the need to work multiple jobs in order to pay for their children’s education, school needs, transportation and so on. When there were not monetary resources to rely upon to pay for education or other needs, African American parents looked for second and even third jobs.

Typical middle class markers include college education, homeownership, mobility, and white collar careers. Systemic racism and unequal access to resources have provided a very different context for Black families than for White families, however, as they have worked to obtain middle class lives and futures for their children. We find the label “superhero parent” to aptly describe the many moving stories we heard of mothers and fathers working hard to provide economic stability for their children and ensure that they had all the resources necessary for academic and professional success.

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Family Social Class and Educational Attainment

by Reggie Curran, Steven B. Frye, Cathy A. Pierce, Mary Ziegler, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Social class exerts a powerful influence on educational attainment, one that is often invisible and unacknowledged. Education is often seen as a way for families to escape poverty, yet individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who graduate from college are far less likely to pursue an advanced degree than are their peers from more affluent backgrounds. Yet some do finish graduate school and enter a profession. What is their experience like and what can we learn from it? A recent research project addressed these questions.

The focus of the research was to better understand the experience of social class from the perspectives of those who earned graduate degrees and entered professional life from working class backgrounds. In-depth interviews were conducted with seven individuals who had completed degrees within the last ten years. Three key findings describe the experience of having a working class background and earning a graduate degree to enter a profession.

Trouble Accessing the System

The higher education system is designed for those who already understand how it works. Individuals from working class backgrounds have no understandable entry point. They cannot rely on parents because their parents had no experience with college and may even have been skeptical of its benefits. One participant in the study said that college was a “foreign world” to his parents. Parents might have been supportive, but they were not able to provide informed assistance. In some cases, school counselors discouraged lower class students from applying to college. One study participant and her sister joined the National Guard because they believed that was the only way they could attend college. They knew nothing of student loans or scholarships or that there was a financial aid process. Others

never visited a college campus to have any idea what it might be like. The experience of entering college or even graduate school was described as “groping in the dark.” Each individual was on his or her own.

Contrasting World Views

Once enrolled in college, those from working class backgrounds have a “working class way of looking at the world” that is different from those that are from more privileged backgrounds. Participants said they did not fit in with or measure up to their peers. The feeling of being an imposter

educational programs because they do not appear to have financial pressures. More affluent peers are seen as having a “legacy” or a framework for knowing how to adjust to higher education. One person said, “I had colleagues whose great grandfathers were college professors.”

Negotiating Dual Roles

College graduates from a working class background often experience conflict about their identity. While they value their roots and their family of origin, they also value their educational experience and the success that education brings them. This contradiction has consequences that

my lead to a lack of connection with their family of origin.

Regardless of their accomplishment, however, many defined their identity as including their working class backgrounds and their families’ values. One individual said, “I’ve got my doctorate and no one can take that away from me. But I still always feel working class...I think my identity will always be that.” Another said she sees the world from her working class background. She described it as “living two lives – work and home.” The gulf between work and home widens as they move up the educational ladder of achievement. Even though participants are eligible for membership in the privileged class by virtue of their degrees, they find connection with the privileged class is unpalatable because of differing values. They perceived that those who are privileged are aloof, a characteristic that separates them from working class people who earn a living by working with their hands. A participant said that working class people cannot forget where they come from. Social class background permeates present experiences.

Social class can be an obstacle for college graduates who want to become professionals. Accessing the system, adjusting to

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One study participant and her sister joined the National Guard because they believed that was the only way they could attend college. They knew nothing of student loans or scholarships or that there was a financial aid process.

was pervasive. One individual used the term “crashing the party” to describe how working class people appear not to have a legitimate place in higher education. What drove him was fear of failure. He feared he would get into an educational program, but not be able to complete it, or worse, learn that college was not a good fit for him. Another participant said that her social class meant that not only did she not belong, but she was insecure and felt that she was unprepared for the college experience.

In addition to not belonging, working class individuals have the pressure of time. Those from working class backgrounds often must continue to work or borrow money to pay for college. This results in pressure to finish as soon as possible. Participants contrasted their experiences with their peers from more affluent backgrounds who appear to have a different experience of higher education. Their worldview seems to be one where they belong, are prepared for college, and have time to invest in their

Does Minority Status Put an Individual At-Risk?

by Amanda Sheffield Morris, PhD, Associate Professor, Human Development and Family Science; and Michael D. S. Morris, PhD, Visiting Assistant Professor, Economics and Legal Studies and Business, Oklahoma State University



Toward the end of last semester, an older African American graduate student asked me during my office hours, "In all the articles that we read for class, why are Blacks always considered at-risk? Has this always been the case? How do I explain this to my children? I really want to know."

"Well," I said, "this is a difficult set of questions, but I assure you that it is *not* because of racial or biological differences. It has more to do with lack of opportunity, low quality education, and income level." Then she asked me, "But why are more black people poor?" At that point, I talked about major gaps in education, and even briefly about the long-term impact of segregation and slavery. I admit I was caught a bit off

guard, but I felt strongly that I did not want the student leaving my office thinking that she or her children were *at-risk* merely because of skin color. I think I managed to convince her, partly by asking her to think of examples that we had discussed in class where at-risk children had benefited from programs such as the Perry Preschool and Abecedarian Projects.

After the student left my office, though, I kept thinking about her questions. At about this same time I saw the call for submission for the next Family Focus on "Social Class." Thus, I began discussing such questions with my colleagues and involved my husband in the discussion as I knew he, as an economist, would have a great perspective on such issues. Here is what we came up with.

What is Race, Anyway?

A variable often closely tied to achievement and adjustment is race. Race is best defined as categorizing individuals by a shared common ancestry, although it is often associated with skin color, eye shape and other outwardly physical characteristics. The concept of race was once thought to identify most accurately the systematic biological differences in people. However, we now know that there is no single genetic difference found in one race and not another. Skin color, most often pointed to as an indicator of racial differences, is tied to geographic proximity to the equator and is independent of genetic differences in hair, eye shape, let alone more complex characteristics such as intelligence or

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SOCIAL CLASS

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contrasting world views, and negotiating dual roles are part of the academic experience for those from a lower socioeconomic class. Even though some of these experiences may be inevitable, others can be addressed by being aware of what the experience of higher education is like for those whose families have never attended college.

Because those who come from a working class background do not have family members who "have been there" and who understand and can guide them through the experience, it is important that those who counsel individuals from lower socioeconomic levels help them negotiate the difficult college consideration process. Advising students about what to expect, when to visit colleges, how to choose a college, and how to complete the paperwork for admission and financial aid is a necessity for those whose families have not been through the process.



Reggie Curran



Steven B. Frye



Cathy A. Pierce



Mary Ziegler

In addition, mentors can be especially important for ensuring comfort with and success in academic endeavors. Mentors are often the reason that people learn how to acclimate themselves to what seems like the foreign environment of college or graduate school. Mentors can provide information about resources for help with writing, using a computer, getting assistance using the library, and tutoring services that can provide additional support for academic pursuits.

If academic institutions provide a forum for discussing class issues people from lower socioeconomic classes might feel less isolated. Because class is rarely discussed in academic settings, individuals from the working class often feel isolated. This isolation may result in higher attrition rates. This study addressed the perception that individuals from the working class have of their experience in higher education and illuminates an area that is often overlooked.

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other talents. In fact, there is far more genetic variation within racial groups than between them, and approximately 85% of all variation can be found within any single racial group.

If it is not strongly genetically-based, then perhaps examining race is more an identification of shared cultural and social traditions better defined as ethnicity. This is not the same as race, as one can have very different ethnic traditions, for example, but still have a common African racial ancestry. Yet if this is what you want to examine or control-for in your research, you might be better served by identifying specific cultural or behavioral norms you think are the contributing factors as opposed to a broad ethnic label. The key variables likely involve more localized, family-specific settings and behaviors.

Race, Income, and Minority Status

Income differences in households are strongly associated with future education, earnings, delinquency, and health of household members. These income differences not only correlate with different racial and ethnic groups but the impact of income differences also are robust across increasingly mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds that defy categorization. Even more importantly, there are strong theoretical reasons why income differences matter: lower income households often have less access to healthcare, less access to educational materials, and are regularly under stress to meet basic needs.

Income is tied to the availability of resources and opportunities, which would then naturally correlate with differences in achievement and adjustment. Racial differences in wealth, net assets, are even more striking than income disparities. On average, white households in the U.S. have about eight times the wealth of Black households. However, when comparing households with the same *income level* across race, that difference falls to about two times the wealth, closing the gap somewhat, but a disparity remains. The reason this difference persists is that wealth accumulates and is passed on between generations, so these differences in wealth and the associated

opportunities are an accumulation of past financial opportunities.

The link between wealth and income differences and racial differences in the U.S. is at least partially a result of past discrimination and limited opportunities as a minority. Minority status simply means being in a smaller group in the surrounding population. There can be a stress and strain in being a minority, and minority status can also highlight a lack of opportunities due to discrimination. But using the concept of minority status is also complex as minority groups can have higher income averages and achievement levels; Asian households in some communities in the U.S. may be one example. In addition, some minority groups, such as Latinos, are now in the majority in some U.S. cities.

And yet, even here, does race, ethnicity, minority status and income drive achievement and adjustment or put one at-risk? Yes, at least somewhat to the extent that it presents opportunities or a lack thereof. But delving further, one begins to think more specifically about the behavioral setting that might correlate with success. One of the strongest predictors of future educational attainment of children in the U.S. is a mother's level of education. The importance of this variable suggests a behavioral difference in the family environment – beyond race, or ethnicity, or even income. This might be the factor you most want to identify (such as maternal encouragement of achievement or parental expectations) when predicting achievement and overall adjustment.

Can Education be the Great Equalizer?

It does not take much effort for anyone to realize the vast inequalities in education in our country, and that the race variable is obviously confounded with quality of education. Go into any inner-city, *failing* school and compare it to a suburban school or an inner-city magnet nearby. It can be argued that we have a two-tier

system of education in our country. So, what happens when you put an *at-risk* child in a better school? The results are quite striking, at least for early childhood education.

Longitudinal, controlled studies have found that low-income children participating in high quality preschool programs are more likely to attend a 4 year college, have children later in life, complete more education, earn higher wages, have higher scores on cognitive tests, and have fewer arrests, compared to children not participating in such programs. According to Nobel Laureate economist James Heckman, one of the highest returns on investments that society can make is investing in quality early childhood education and environments. More research needs to be done on the effects of quality schooling among older children, with comparable control groups, but we argue that it is likely that quality education is indeed the most advantageous *and* ethical way to improve the lives of at-risk children and youth.

Does minority status put a person at risk? Certainly much more than biological race must be considered when answering such a question. We argue that an individual is *not* at risk because of the genes associated with skin color, but it is the social response to skin color in many cases that can put an individual at-risk. It is more likely that the lack of income and poor education put an individual at risk. Moreover, many studies in the social sciences attempting to explain success, achievement, and/or mental health find that race, ethnicity, and even income explain only a small portion of the variance. It is, therefore, something in the individual or family that appears to be associated with success or failure; we argue that that *something* is much more than skin color or race. Indeed, context (e.g., income, parenting, and educational opportunities) *and* individual characteristics (e.g., temperament, beliefs, and personality) must be considered when examining risk and resiliency.

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It is, therefore, something in the individual or family that appears to be associated with success or failure...

Female Educational Attainment and Family Formation: Which Comes First?

by Cynthia S. Reeser, Doctoral Student, Department of Family Studies, University of Kentucky

The strength of the linkage between social class and education is profound. Throughout most of our history, education has been inaccessible to all but the most privileged in our society, thereby holding most people in the social class to which they were born. Tom Mortenson of The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education reported recently that even today, 79 percent of bachelor's degrees go to those in the top two family income quartiles, a proportion that has not changed more than a few points in the past thirty years despite diversification efforts by postsecondary education. As sociologist Max Weber noted in the 1940s, social classes are differentiated on the basis of wealth, power, and prestige. According to the large body of social attainment literature, educational attainment is a catalyst for all three, particularly among males.

Females are another story. Traditionally, a woman's social class was identified first by that of her family of origin and then by the occupation of her spouse. Regardless of her own educational attainment, a woman married to a physician functioned in a higher social class than the wife of the pharmacist. Until equal opportunity laws opened prestigious occupations to greater numbers of females, the young women sent to college by their families were intent on obtaining the degree having the greatest effect on social class, i.e., the one with the initials MRS. We know from mate selection research that a woman's prospects were improved when she married "up". What better place to look for a potential spouse preparing himself for an occupation of some prestige than on a college campus?

As I watch the mating rituals among college students each spring, I am reminded that this approach continues unabated despite

the economic realities of contemporary society. What today's female students may not comprehend is that they will be in the labor force along with the young men they marry—not necessarily to improve their social class but, all too frequently, in order to simply maintain it. Dual incomes have become the norm, even for those women who would prefer to be what Catherine Hakim calls "home-centered". In her 2003 explanation of female lifestyle preferences, Hakim estimated that in developed countries such as Britain and the United States, the percentage of women at opposite ends of the family/career continuum is roughly equal at 20 percent each.

The 60 percent in the middle are made up of "adaptable" women, including those who plan their education in order to accommodate work and family life as well as those without a plan, whose choices are contextually informed by social norms, mate availability, early family formation, and the local job market.

Based on her body of research on women in poverty, Claudia J. Heath of the University of Kentucky uses the term "purposeless drift" to describe those females whose lifestyle and educational choices remain externally-driven by traditional roles and limited local economic opportunities. With a rural population twice that of the national average (44 percent versus 22 percent), the percentage of women who fall into this category in Kentucky may be reasonably presumed to be higher than Hakim's international figures.

Interestingly enough, the persistent opinion among the young female students in my research methods class, most from the middle class, is that they will be able to manage work and family formation *sequentially*. However, the odds of that happening are not high, a fact already well known to my nontraditional students.

Female employment is not a recent phenomenon. Women have worked outside the home in large numbers at least since World War II when the short labor supply made employment as much a patriotic duty as a matter of economics. The difference between those days and today is that when the men returned, mothers with children still at home left the workplace to care for them. Now women do

both. Census Bureau reports over the last four decades have shown a steady increase in the rate of female labor force participation, from 37.7 percent in 1960 to 60 percent in the year 2000. Most of that increase is accounted for by mothers of increasingly younger children, including newborns. Mandatory parental leave policies and the increased availability of child care are contemporary indicators that work and family formation are not, in fact, sequential.

Where once a woman's social status was tied to her familial roles (e.g., married or not, with children or not), today she is just as likely as her male counterpart to be asked "What do you do?" With the increase in dual-income households necessitated by the decline in real wages since the 1970s, far fewer can afford to stay out of the workforce for an extended period in order

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Not surprisingly, the women with the best chances of exercising their preferences are those who defer family formation until they have completed their education.

Reaching for Success from a Place Seen as 'Second Best': Social Class, Trailer Park Residence and Youth Development



by Katherine MacTavish, Assistant Professor, Oregon State University

I did things backwards. I had kids, then got married and then chose a career. I hope my kids do things the other way around.

– Mother of two

I hope they can all find a job that will give them the income to support a family. I hope they all finish school up to and including college. That they don't start a family until they're done [with school].

– Father of four

These two parents, like parents in general, hope for a life that offers their children broader choices than they experienced. As parent they have made moves to secure such a life for their children. Both have achieved the status of homeowner and both live in a small town they see as a good place to raise their children. Yet for both, their hopes of a brighter future for their

children are potentially challenged by social class and place as these are *working poor* parents who call a *trailer park* home—a neighborhood they readily identify as “second best.”

Despite the achievement ideology of American culture that motivates dreams of social mobility, we know most kids grow

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to devote themselves exclusively to childrearing. Yet, parental involvement remains a key predictor of healthy childhood development regardless of social class. In our advocacy of practices that are good for children, I wonder if we help place our female students on the horns of a dilemma. Which comes first, education or family formation, and which is more important? Do our students really understand education's connection to social class, especially those students at risk of not completing their degrees? Just as importantly, what are our own perspectives on what happens to a woman's career after the children arrive, and how do we telegraph those perspectives? The questions are made more complicated by the prevalence of single-parent households, predominantly headed by women, many of whom are undereducated and poor. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, half of America's households reported annual incomes in 2004 of less than \$30,000.

As Kathryn Hynes and Marin Clarkberg found in their 2005 study of the employment patterns of new mothers, female choices are both highly individualistic and context-based. Six different patterns emerged in their research, with age at first birth and

educational attainment predicting women's movement out of and *back into* the labor force. Not surprisingly, the women with the best chances of exercising their preferences are those who defer family formation until they have completed their education.

Many women do not. Every semester I encounter a few meeting one or more of the six characteristics the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) has developed for determining nontraditional student status. Despite NCES estimates that 73 percent of postsecondary students fit that description, much of campus life continues to be geared to the traditionally-aged student. Women adding school to their already difficult work and child care schedules enter the classroom culture at a disadvantage. These liabilities often add depth to our discussions of family studies topics. More problematic are the times when child care issues threaten academic success through persistent tardiness, excessive absences, and the occasional child brought to the classroom. The women who persist to graduation are a determined lot. The NCES has found that only half of college students who enter postsecondary institutions with multiple nontraditional characteristics are still enrolled three years later.

Does educational attainment really matter for the 80 percent of women Hakim estimated to be other than work-centered? In their 2003 study of fertility patterns based on economic modeling, David de la Croix and Matthias Doepke offer a compelling argument in the affirmative. Women of different social classes produce families of different sizes, with larger families typically found in less advantaged classes. These are also the classes making lower educational investments, for a variety of reasons. The authors point out that, ultimately, this recurring pattern will have a multiplier effect on our society's ability to accumulate human capital. The results will be an ever widening gap between social classes and our increased difficulty in remaining competitive in the global economy. Does female educational attainment matter? You bet it does.



Cynthia Reeser

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up to reproduce the class status of their parents. While a mobile home park offers affordable access to small town residence, it remains a stigmatized place that densely clusters together a community's younger, poorer, and less educated residents in a manner much like a ghetto—a place we know to narrow the life chance of children.

As part of a year long ethnographic field study we examined the developmental pathways available to ten youth growing up in a trailer park just outside of the upscale village of "Prairieview, Illinois." While Prairieview offered many resources and opportunities that might support successful development, we found few park youth realized such benefits. Only two youth in our study managed a pathway offering a chance for social mobility that their parents hope for.

At 15 years of age "Trinity" was *flourishing*. She lived with her mother and new stepfather in an older singlewide home. The worn brown carpeting and a sleeping bag hung for a living room curtain reflected the family's precarious financial situation. Yet her mother proudly proclaimed, "Trinity's not your typical trailer park kid—she's a straight A student, a cheerleader and on the dance team."

Melanie, who lived with grandparents in an older home along the edge of the trailer park, likewise made good marks in school as a straight "A" students, was popular with her church group peers, and consistently abided by the rules.

Trinity and Melanie stood out among their trailer park peers with a shine of success. Among the other youth, four appeared *static* headed toward socially reproducing their parents working-poor class status and another four were *floundering*, heading toward compromised development and narrowed life chances. What did it take for these two youth to flourish in their trailer park neighborhood?

Reaching for success

Two features characterized Trinity and Melanie's construction of a *flourishing* pathway. First, they had purposely distanced

themselves from their trailer park neighborhood; virtually avoiding all contact with childhood peers and places. Second, they had become a member of the community outside their trailer park. Trinity explained, "I don't like living in a trailer park, but really I don't feel like I'm a part of it. I like Prairieview and that's where I feel I belong." She began her transition away from the park and toward town in seventh grade when a school friend invited her to church. Since, she had developed an intense relationship with this friend and her family as well as with teachers, coaches and clergy. Daily life for Trinity included cheerleading practice, church youth group, school chorus and a paid job in town.

While a mobile home park offers affordable access to small town residence, it remains a stigmatized place that densely clusters together a community's younger, poorer, and less educated residents in a manner much like a ghetto—a place we know to narrow the life chance of children.

Melanie's life centered on her church activities. She credits several adults—a youth minister, a Sunday school teacher, and the lady who drove the church bus and gave her hand-me down clothes as with having significantly influenced her life. Over spring break Melanie traveled to spend time with her minister's family. That next fall she began attending a small, private high school run by the church.

Trinity and Melanie both had broadened their developmental world to include many middle-class people, places, and activities.

In contrast, the world of *floundering* youth centered on the trailer park. Pressed by perceptions of stigmatization as *trailer*

trash in town, these youth had narrowed their daily lives to a small set of social ties concentrated in the trailer park neighborhood. As they became part of "the wrong crowd," they were essentially alienated from community life outside the circumscribed boundaries of the park.

Parenting toward success

For their part, the parents of both *flourishing* youth invested time, energy, and even money in supporting their child's transition away from the park and toward town. Trinity's mother explained, "Trinity hated riding the bus. You could see it—she would stand off away from the other kids. Here's Trinity and here's all the other kids fighting and cussing. She told me, 'Mom I'm not like those other kids.' After that I never put her on the bus again." Although their home was modest, Trinity always wore the right brand named clothes that would ensure she fit in in this upscale town. Her mother selflessly sacrificed personal time during the day to support Trinity's engagement in town by driving her to various activities.

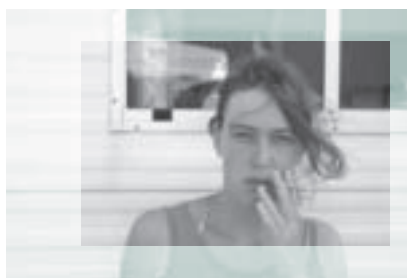
Melanie's parents also invested in her developmental success. During an interview her mother (actually biological grandmother) said, I hope you don't mind if I fold these newspapers while we talk. Melanie has a paper route and I like to have the papers ready when she gets home." Her father (biological grandfather) supplied her with a modest car that would allow her to drive to her many church activities.

For both, the availability to family time was key to parents' investment in youth. Trinity's mother had a job that allowed for a flexible work schedule that she dictated. Melanie's mother had a disability that kept her home full time and father was semi-retired.

Implications

While this study focused only one community we have seen these same patterns around the intersection of class, place, and youth development in subsequent studies in both New Mexico and Oregon. Intervention efforts could help change these

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Race, Class, and Extended Family Involvement

by Natalia Sarkisian, PhD, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Boston College and Naomi Gerstel, PhD, Professor of Sociology, University of Massachusetts Amherst

Commentators often emphasize the disorganization and dysfunction of Black and Latino/a family life. Many report that minority men, especially Blacks, have abandoned their families. They often imply that if we could fix family values in minority communities, all their problems would be solved. But they overlook something far more important: class inequalities.

Racial Differences in Extended Families

First and foremost, families are not just nuclear units consisting of mother, father and young children. If we look at families of color, it becomes especially important to be more inclusive by recognizing ties to adult children, aging parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, cousins, and other kin. Doing so refutes the myth of minority family disorganization. According to our research using the second wave of the National Survey of Families and Households, in many ways Blacks and Latinos/as have stronger ties to their extended families than do Whites:

- These minorities, both women and men, are much more likely than Whites to share a home with extended kin – 42% of Blacks, 38% of Mexican Americans, 39% of Puerto Ricans, but only 20% of Whites live with relatives.
- Similar patterns obtain for living near relatives: 54% of Blacks, 52% of Mexican Americans, and 59% of Puerto Ricans but only 37% of Whites live close to kin (within 2 miles).
- Blacks and Latinos/as are also more likely than Whites to visit kin frequently. For example, 76% of Blacks, 71% of Latinos/as, but 63% of Whites see their relatives face-to-face once a week or more.
- Blacks and Latinos/as are more likely than Whites to give and receive practical help such as assistance with household work, child care and babysitting, as well

as rides and running errands. In contrast, Whites are more likely than ethnic minorities to give and receive money and emotional support.

The Importance of Gender

Many of these differences exist only among women. Black women and Latinas are much more likely than White women to give and receive help with housework and child care. In contrast, Black, Latino, and White men are quite similar in terms of helping out – they only differ in terms of giving and receiving large-scale financial help (with White men more likely to give such help). Although Black and Latino men are more likely than White men to live near relatives and to stay in touch with them, they are very similar to White men in terms of providing or getting help and support.

This is in stark contrast to the popular perception of minority men as socially marginalized and disengaged from their families. Although many suggest that Black men are substituting street-corner networks

for familial ones, this is not the case when we look at their involvement with parents, brothers, sisters, and other relatives.

How Do We Explain Race Differences: Is it Culture or Class?

We often hear arguments that racial and ethnic differences in family experiences can be traced to cultural differences, such as differences in religiosity, beliefs about the importance of family, and gender ideologies. Proponents of a cultural approach view Black family patterns as the cultural legacy of slavery and subsequent years of oppression or reflections of values rooted in Africa. These earlier experiences, they say, shaped the values of Blacks as a group, which in turn continue to shape their family involvement. Similarly, they argue that Latino/a families are culturally distinctive either because they trace their roots to indigenous cultures such as Aztec or Taino or because the history of Spanish colonial rule in Latin America resulted in traditions, values, and religion which

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patterns. Efforts that work toward eliminating the social distance between working poor trailer park families and small town resources would help. Training teacher, coaches and clergy in the art of mentoring lower-income youth would go far to strengthen the social capacity of small towns like Prairieview to support the successful development of youth from all social classes. Developing opportunities for youth to engage in productive activities within their trailer park would make the neighborhood a more developmentally resourceful place. Helping families develop effective parenting strategies for managing floundering youth would shore up the development of such youth. Helping youth understand how to resist stigmatization

could help sustain engagement in the community. Intervention efforts such as these could help support the development of an estimated 5 million children and youth growing up in a rural trailer park.



Katherine MacTavish

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EXTENDED FAMILY *continued from page F14*

persist among Latinos/as in the United States today.

Others insist that social class rather than culture is the key to understanding Black and Latino/a families. It is widely known that Blacks and Latinos/as have less income, wealth, and education than Whites. Some scholars argue that economic deprivation among racial/ethnic minorities is responsible for higher levels of extended family involvement, arguing that it is the lack of economic resources that increases the need for help from kin and reduces opportunities to migrate away from them. Other scholars also emphasize the importance of class but reverse the argument, saying that economic deprivation severely restricts the time and money available to be shared with kin, separating people from their relatives.

Our research shows that class trumps culture. The extended family differences between Whites and ethnic minorities are primarily the result of social class: Those with more income and education are more likely to give or get money and emotional support, but they are also less likely to live with or near kin or to provide practical assistance. Simply put, Blacks, Latinos/as, and Whites of the same social class have about the same level and kind of involvement with their relatives.

To be sure, differences in values do exist. Blacks and Latinos/as are more likely than Whites to say they believe that extended family is important; they are also more likely to attend religious services. Moreover, they differ in their beliefs about gender roles: Blacks hold more egalitarian beliefs than Whites, while Latinos/as, especially Mexican Americans, are more traditional. But these differences in values do not explain racial differences in actual involvement with relatives. It is, instead, class that matters in this country today.

These findings do not mean that ethnicity does not affect family life; it does. The class standing of Whites and ethnic minorities are far from equal, and as race/ethnicity shapes class position, it is key for understanding family experiences.

What Does This Mean for Social Policy?

These research findings have important implications for the ways we design social policy. Family policies that take into account only nuclear family obligations are too narrow and may introduce, reproduce, or even increase ethnic inequalities. The relatives of Blacks and Latinos/as are more likely than those of Whites to provide various kinds of support that policy tends

to assume is only provided by husbands and wives. Policies that do not take extended kin obligations into account are especially neglectful of minorities. For example, the Family and Medical Leave Act only guarantees unpaid leaves to provide care to spouses, children or elderly parents requiring medical attention. Similarly, substance abuse rehabilitation programs often provide arrangements for child care while a parent participates in the program.

These do not provide arrangements for care given to extended family members, such as elderly parents, adult children, and needy grown up brothers or sisters. Our findings suggest that such policies must be broadened if we really want to support families.

Policymakers also must recognize that class matters more than cultural values. Support from family cannot compensate for the disadvantages of being poor, or minority, or both. For example, minorities are less likely than Whites to give money to relatives or receive money from them because Blacks and Latinos/as are more often poor. Therefore, minorities face a double disadvantage: Not only are they more likely to have to survive on low incomes and little, if any, wealth, but they also do not get much money from kin, because their relatives are in the same situation. TANF might exacerbate this problem by reducing extended families' ability to continue providing support. Distinctions found in some policies between family care and non-familial care may also increase economic disadvantage. For example, Medicaid regulations that only pay for non-familial care discriminate against Blacks and Latinos/as who provide significant amounts of care to extended kin. Recent welfare policy that allows parents to pay kin for providing child care may help rectify some of these inequalities.

Finally, the different levels of kin support among Blacks, Latinos/as and Whites should not determine who gets help—rather, the ability of existing supports to meet existing needs must be considered.

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Our research shows that class trumps culture.

Resources on Social Class

The Future of Children Journal, Opportunity in America, is an anthology of articles on Social Mobility edited by Isabel Sawhill and Sara McClanahan. It's available free on-line in PDF format. www.futureofchildren.org.

The Urban Institute offers numerous studies, reports and books on social class and related topics—many free on PDF. Visit www.urban.org.

The Center for Law and Policy (CLASP) provides a diverse collection of resources on low-income families and public policy at www.clasp.org.

Princeton's Fragile Family and Child Well-being Study website is located at <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/>.

The U.S. Census is the go-to source for governmental demography; in the "Families and Households" division, there is a specific section available on poverty located at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/poverty.html>.



NCFR Conference 2006 in Minneapolis



upper left: Lynette Olson, Chair of the Education and Enrichment Section, confers the 2006 Margaret Arcus Award to Joan Comeaux.

upper right: RaeAnn Hamon received the Special Recognition Award for Outstanding Service to the CFLE Program for 2006.

above left: NCFR President-Elect Maxine Hammonds-Smith and President Pamela Monroe.

above right: Harriet McAdoo and Edith Lewis congratulate Cindy Winter on her phenomenal career. A proud spouse, Doug Winter, looks on.

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