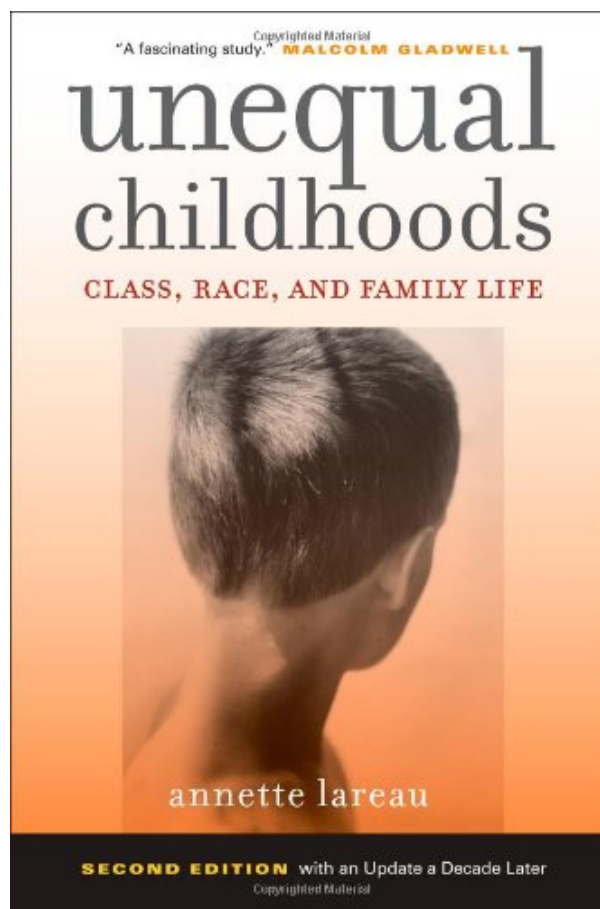


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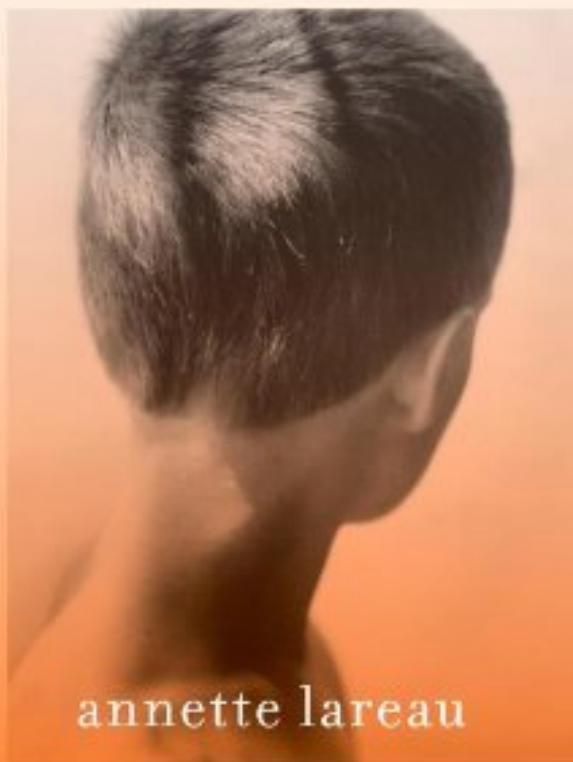
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unequal childhoods

CLASS, RACE, AND FAMILY LIFE



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Class does make a difference in the lives and futures of American children. Drawing on in-depth observations of black and white middle-class, working-class, and poor families, *Unequal Childhoods* explores this fact, offering a picture of childhood today. Here are the frenetic families managing their children's hectic schedules of "leisure" activities; and here are families with plenty of time but little economic security. Lareau shows how middle-class parents, whether black or white, engage in a process of "concerted cultivation" designed to draw out children's talents and skills, while working-class and poor families rely on "the accomplishment of natural growth," in which a child's development unfolds spontaneously—as long as basic comfort, food, and shelter are provided. Each of these approaches to childrearing brings its own benefits and its own drawbacks. In identifying and analyzing differences between the two, Lareau demonstrates the power, and limits, of social class in shaping the lives of America's children.

The first edition of *Unequal Childhoods* was an instant classic, portraying in riveting detail the unexpected ways in which social class influences parenting in white and African American families. A decade later, Annette Lareau has revisited the same families and interviewed the original subjects to examine the impact of social class in the transition to adulthood.

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Most helpful customer reviews

41 of 42 people found the following review helpful.

A Must-Read for Parents and Educators

By H. Wise

I've assigned Lareau's original work for several years in a lower-level Race, Class and Gender Sociology course taught for elementary education majors. This is THE book students remember from the course and the one that provides them with the perspective they need to deal with educational issues connected to social class. I highly recommend this second edition as it addresses the ultimate question of what happened to the children and how their life chances varied according to social standing. Excellent read for anyone interested in parental involvement, student achievement, and the mechanisms which we use to navigate the social institution of education with varying degrees of success.

24 of 25 people found the following review helpful.

A fabulous update to the original gem

By C. Slocum

Annette Lareau updates her 2006 book with extra chapters that follow her subjects into adulthood and describe methodological strengths and issues. The core of the book is the same, and retains its finding. The last few chapters explore late teens for the students. The findings that concerted cultivation exists in the middle class continue through the college application process, with middle class teens receiving help from family and working class teens trying to get help from schools and other institutions. Chapter 14 is a rare and very honest glimpse into how research subjects feel about the research being done about them. Long story short: most do not like it. Dr. Lareau includes quotes and letters describing this, which should serve as a point-to think for student ethnographers. Chapter 15 mathematically models class and time use data from the PSID.

Often second edition of books are different from the first edition in very minor ways. That is not true of this edition. I highly recommend it.

21 of 22 people found the following review helpful.

Unequal opportunities means inherited inequality

By Paul Froehlich

Most Americans see individual effort as the key to success, with fewer than one in five seeing class or race as very important in getting ahead in life. The reality is that social class is a more important determinant of a person's success in life than it used to be due to two powerful trends: Growing economic inequality that has created a wider gulf between rich and poor, and less mobility between classes. The fact is the USA has both less social mobility and wider economic inequality than any of the other rich democracies in Canada,

Australia, Japan and western Europe.

With more sluggish mobility than in the past, class has become more hereditary than it once was. The gap in spending per child is growing between rich and poor Americans, from 5 to 1 in 1972 to 9 to 1 in 2007. Just 17 percent of kids raised in the bottom fifth of the income distribution will make it to the top two-fifths by age 40.

It's no wonder then that class differences are so powerful in shaping a child's life experience, more important in child raising than racial differences, according to Annette Lareau, a sociology professor at the University of Pennsylvania, who won awards for the first edition of this book in 2002.

Lareau's research reveals the basic class differences in approach to raising children. Middle-class parents have their children in organized activities and engage in a process of "concerted cultivation." By contrast, working-class and poor parents don't engage their children in concerted cultivation, instead allowing development through "natural growth."

Poor parents face economic challenges just putting food on the table and getting medical care. They lack the resources and energy to put their kids in as many organized activities. Children are left with more unstructured time, which is spent in front of a TV or playing with child relatives and friends, with much less direct adult supervision than in the middle-class organized activities.

Most of the book is devoted to in-depth studies of individual middle-class and working class students. Those studies reveal differences in how parents nurture their children and why middle-class children learn skills essential for later success that their poorer counterparts don't learn.

Middle-class mothers, for example, tend to be interventionist at school or other institutional settings, intervening in situations. "By teaching their children how to get organizations to meet their individualized needs, middle-class mothers pass along skills that have the potential to be extremely valuable to their children in adulthood. These are class-based advantages." Middle-class parents tend to have a better understanding of how institutions work and therefore of how to effectively influence them.

Working class mothers tend to be more passive and deferential when it comes to school. They tend to be more respectful of educators' professional expertise than are their middle-class counterparts. These parents feel they lack the vocabulary to deal assertively with educational and medical professionals.

Lareau did a follow up a decade later with the children in her study (who were ten at the time of the original study) and again 15 years later. She found that social class continued to matter in their lives, affecting how much education they obtained and their options in the world of work. As the children in the study matured, income inequality widened, with all but one of the middle-class subjects becoming professionals, compared to none of the working-class and poor subjects.

Though all of the parents in the study loved their children and wanted the best for them, the fact is that none of the working-class/poor subjects achieved a college degree. By age 10, the die was cast, making it likely that children would end up in situations similar to those of their parents. "It is not impossible for individuals to significantly change their life position, but it is not common."

Lareau concludes that class-related differences in child rearing lead to the "transmission of differential advantages to children." Those differential advantages belie the common American belief that there is equal opportunity for those with hard work and talent to succeed, and that our success or lack thereof is an

individual responsibility. It's tempting for those who aren't poor to blame those who are for their plight. Looking at inequality from a class perspective, however, aids understanding about how inequality is inherited. Americans tend to downplay or not notice class-based advantages they receive.

Our meritocratic culture implies a competition with fair play and deserved outcomes. The working class works hard, but opportunities for advancement are nonetheless limited. The system is not neutral or fair: it does not give all children equal opportunities. "The life paths we pursue are neither equal nor freely chosen."

The transmission of privilege, however, is `misrecognized." Individuals tend to see social class as earned. In other words, status and privilege are perceived as earned by talent, intelligence and effort. Lareau and other sociologists see that social position is not the result of personal attributes such as effort or intelligence, but more the result of socialization that transmits social skills, social networks, and resources.

"The social position of one's family or origin has profound implications for life experiences and life outcomes. But the inequality our system creates and sustains is invisible and thus unrecognized. We would be a better country if we could enlarge our truncated vocabulary about the importance of social class, for only then might we acknowledge the class divisions among us." ###

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