Social Class and Parental Investment in Children

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Abstract

This essay critically reviews the literature on social class differences in parental investment in children including differences in (i) parenting practices or behavior; (ii) parenting styles, logics, and strategies; and (iii) parenting values and ideologies. The essay reveals how structural and cultural barriers contribute to creating social class differences in the ways parents interact with their children, as well as in the way they protect and promote their children's development and well-being. This essay covers some of the foundational research in the field as well as newer research which has started to question the strict social class divide in parental investment. In particular, this essay discusses recent research on the resistance to the dominant ideology of good parenting, and studies of the complex interactions between social class, race and ethnicity, and gender. This essay concludes with a discussion of future research avenues including a call for a better empirical operationalization of the concept of parental investment.

INTRODUCTION

Parental investment in children is one of the most important determinants of children's well-being and development (Barber, 2000; Kalil & DeLeire, 2004). It is also a highly stratified determinant with large variations across social class (Smeeding, Erikson, & Jantti, 2011). There is no standard definition of parental investment, but in simple terms it can be said to be capturing what parents do with their children, what they do for their children, as well as the emotional climate in which they raise their children. More formally, parental investment refers to the allocation of time, money, and emotional resources by parents to their children as well as parents' management of their children's risks and opportunities.

The importance of parental investment for children's academic and cognitive development has been solidly demonstrated in numerous studies (e.g., Barber, Stoltz, & Olsen, 2005). Where the debate instead lies are in

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the reasons behind the observed social class differences in parental investment, more specifically whether such social class differences are driven by structure or culture (Sherman & Harris, 2012). Proponents of the structural argument point to deep socioeconomic status (SES) inequalities, including inequalities in resources and opportunities, as reasons preventing parents from low SES from investing more in their children. Differential access to quality schools, poor community infrastructure, and income constraints are examples of structural barriers confronting low SES families. In contrast, proponents of the cultural argument point to intrinsic class-based norms and practices that result in social class differences in parental investment and which ultimately contribute to the reproduction of class. Lower educational aspirations for their children, and a lower emphasis on values such as entitlement, self-control, and self-efficacy by low social class parents are examples of cultural barriers which are argued to be reinforcing social class differences. This dichotomous debate, opposing structure versus culture, was at the core of the foundational research on parenting and parental investment in children. As discussed in this essay, it is however currently losing momentum in favor of a more complex understanding of parental investment involving race/ethnicity, class, and gender. Newer and cutting-edge research is delving deeper into the daily reality of families in order to better understand the motives, opportunities, and barriers to parental investment. In turn, such a research can be argued to be essential to help develop evidence-based policies and programs to tackle the deep social class inequalities in children's outcomes.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

PARENTAL RESOURCES, PRACTICES, AND BEHAVIOR

One of the ways parental investment in children has been captured in the literature is through its time component. On the basis of time-diary instruments, research dating back to the 1980s has highlighted the educational gradient in parental time allocation to their children (Hill & Stafford, 1985). Even after controlling for numerous individual-level characteristics, more highly educated parents were found to be devoting more time to their children. This is a robust finding that has since been observed in numerous countries (Craig, 2006; Gauthier, Smeeding, & Furstenberg, 2004; Kalil, Ryan, & Corey, 2012; Sayer, Gauthier, & Furstenberg, 2004). Studies have also revealed strong SES differences in time spent on education-enrichment activities (Craig, 2006), verbal interaction with children (Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2003), and reading to children (Davis-Kean, 2005; Yarosz & Barnett, 2001). In other words, the way parents allocate their time and the type of activities they engage in appear to be strongly patterned by social class.

Parents from higher SES also appear to be devoting more financial resources to their children including on items such as education (Mauldin, Mimura, & Lino, 2001), childcare (Bianchi, Cohen, Raley, & Nomaguchi, 2004), and educational material in the house (Bradley, Corwyn, McAdoo, & Garcia Coll, 2001). There is also evidence that the inequalities in household expenditures on children have been increasing over time resulting in greater polarization between low- and high-income families (Kornrich & Furstenberg, 2013).

Parenting Style and Logic

The previous body of literature is focused on specific forms of parental investment in children. In contrast, parenting style can be theoretically seen as providing the emotional context for parenting (Darling & Steinberg, 1993). There is a long tradition of research on parenting style stemming from the seminal work of Baumrind (1967). Parents, it has been argued, differ considerably in terms of two key dimensions: (i) their level of responsiveness toward their children and (ii) their level of demandingness (Baumrind, 1991; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). The resulting typology of parenting style has been—and continues to be—widely used in the literature and has repeatedly been identified as a key determinant of child development. In particular, an authoritative parenting style (high responsiveness and high demandingness) has been found to be associated with better child outcomes than the other parenting styles. Moreover, this parenting style has been found to be more prevalent among higher SES parents (Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987). More recent studies have however questioned the validity of this finding across different cultural and economic childrearing contexts (e.g., Domenech Rodriguez, Donovick, & Crowley, 2009). In particular, the adoption of more restrictive and punitive parenting style by low SES parents has been argued to be a reaction to more hostile and dangerous living conditions (Furstenberg, 1993; Kotchick & Forehand, 2002).

In a different body of literature, the context of parenting and the principles guiding parental investment in children have been explored under the heading of childrearing logic. The most important and influential piece here is the study by Lareau (2002, 2003, 2011) based on intensive ethnographic observations of a small sample of middle-class, working-class, and poor families in the United States. Two distinct childrearing logics emerged from her analysis: (i) the logic of concerted cultivation which aims at developing children's talents and at providing them with a sense of confidence and entitlement primarily through the use of reasoning and variations in parent–child verbal interactions as well as children's participation in extracurricular activities and (ii) the logic of natural growth characterized by more unstructured time for children and less contacts with the adult world. Importantly, Lareau argues that the former logic is more likely to be adopted by the middle-class and the latter by the working-class.

PARENTING VALUES, NORMS, AND IDEOLOGIES

Parents not only do things with, and for, their children, but they also aim at instilling them with specific values. In a now classic study carried out in the late 1950s, Kohn (1959, 1976) revealed deep social class differences in the values associated with childrearing. More specifically, middle-class parents were found to be emphasizing to a greater extent the value of self-direction and autonomy while working-class parents were found to be more likely to demand compliance to parental authority. Kohn further argued that these social class differences stemmed from differences in parents' occupations, which, in turn, were aimed at better preparing children for their future (class-based) occupations (Hoff, Laursen, & Tardiff, 2002). The hypothesis of social class differences in parenting values has since been substantiated in numerous studies (Gerris, Dekovic, & Janssens, 1997; Luster, Rhoades, & Haas, 1989), with some however stressing the importance of parental education as opposed to occupation as the key determinant (J. D. Wright & S. R. Wright, 1976).

Recent work in this field has pushed further the examination of parenting values by highlighting the apparent contradictions between parenting values, on the one hand, and parenting behavior, on the other. As discussed by Weininger & Lareau (2009), while middle-class parents highly value autonomy and self-direction, they tend to exert a high level of control over their children's schedule and related activities. In contrast, while working-class parents value conformity to external authority, they provide children with more freedom over their use of time. The apparent paradox, it has been argued, suggests complex links between parenting values and behavior: links that have been insufficiently explored in the literature.

Deep social class differences are also found in parenting beliefs and ideologies of "good" parenting (Alwin, 2001). In particular, Hays (1986) has argued that recent decades have seen the emergence of a new parenting ideology, which she calls "intensive mothering" and that she defines as "child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive" (Hays (1986), p. 54). She furthermore argues that this is a parenting ideology that has been more strongly endorsed by middle-class parents. It is an ideology that carries large expectations regarding mothers' time availability for their children and that has large implications for their labor force participation (Johnston & Swanson 2006; Maher & Saugeres 2007; Parson, Pacholok, Snape, & Gauthier, 2012; Vincent, Rollock, Ball, & Gillborn, 2004). Recent studies have in fact documented the struggles and tensions mothers are confronted to when trying to uphold this new standard of good mothering and the concurrent expectations of "good" workers (Christopher, 2012; Rizzo, Schiffrin, & Liss, 2012).

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

While the foundational research reviewed earlier has provided solid evidence of social class differences in parental investment in children, recent cutting-edge research has questioned some of the key assumptions and findings of this earlier body of literature. Three main issues have been examined.

First, there is the assumption of class homogeneity in the work by Lareau (2002, 2011), more specifically the assumption that middle-class and working-class parents adhere to contrasting cultural strategies of childrearing. Instead, new research has pointed to much heterogeneity within classes especially regarding parents' motives and strategies of childrearing. Research on working-class parents has for instance shown that disadvantaged families do, to a large extent, adhere to the logic of concerted cultivation: they have high aspirations for their children and provide significant educational support (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). Where such families struggle is in finding the time and financial resources to implement such aspirations and such a high level of parental involvement (O'Brien Hallstein, 2008). For example, recent research has pointed to the discrepancy between the high educational aspirations of middle-income parents and their severe income constraints making their hopes of sending their children to college an unlikely reality (Napolitano, Pacholok, & Furstenberg, 2013). Yet, other studies continue to point to strong class-based cultural differences. For instance, a recent study of low-income mothers in Canada revealed the resistance of this group of mothers to the ideology of intensive mothering. Although low-income mothers were aware of the dominant standards of good mothering and attempted to implement some of it (e.g., reading to their children), they also questioned some of its tenets especially what they perceived as the over-involvement of parents (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012).

Considerable heterogeneity has also been observed within middle-class families. In this case, part of this heterogeneity stems from ambivalence and resistance to the dominant model of parenting (Brown, 2011; Irwin and Elley, 2011). For some time, the popular psychology literature had been warning parents about the dangers of hyper-parenting and over-scheduling (Honore, 2009; Rosenfeld & Wise, 2000). What is new here is evidence of middle-class mothers' resistance to some of the demands of intensive mothering. This includes criticisms of the excess, pushiness, and over-ambitious of other middle-class mothers, as well as a stated preference for quality time (togetherness) as opposed to the relentless schedule of families whose children are involved in so many activities (Perrier, 2012).

Second, the recent literature has also questioned. Lareau's claim regarding the dominance of social class over race in determining childrearing strategies. In particular, research on the Black middle-class in the United Kingdom has pointed to the commitments of these parents to the standards of concerted cultivation and to the educational success of their children while also trying to equip their children to live in a racist society (Vincent *et al.*, 2012). In contrast, research on African-American middle-class mothers has highlighted the distance between the dominant model of intensive mothering and the ideology instead valued by these mothers. Coined "integrated mothering," this ideology stresses the importance of nonparental childcare support, the centrality of paid employment, and considerations of race and racism (Dow, 2011). Other studies have also pointed to the extra work done by middle-class ethnic families in order to being heard by schools and to fight stereotypes of underachievement (Archer, 2010).

Third, while Lareau's work was relatively silent on the gender dimension of parental involvement with children, recent research has highlighted significant gender dimensions especially in the implementation of concerted cultivation between boys and girls. Parents, it was found, invest more time and resources in girls as compared to boys, although this gender difference was found to vary across race, SES, and type of activity (McCoy, Byrne, & Banks, 2012; Warner & Milkie, 2013). Finally, recent research has also examined men's experience of intensive parenting in pointing to men's relative insulation from the demands of such ideology (Shirani, Henwood, & Coltart, 2012), while also revealing large social, economic and ethnic variations (McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000). Yet, and as recently argued, there is a need for a better integration of fathering in parenting research (Pleck, 2012).

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Measurement

The first key issue is that of measurement, that is, how best to capture quantitatively parental investment and especially the concepts of intensive parenting and concerted cultivation. There is obviously a wide array of parental investment indicators that have been used in the literature, but there remains a gulf separating, on the one hand, research on specific parental practices and time allocation (mostly based on quantitative data), and on the other hand, research on parenting ideologies and strategies (mostly based on qualitative data). Some recent attempts have been made to bridge these two bodies of literature. For example, concerted cultivation has been measured through the combination of data on (i) parents' school engagement, (ii) children's participation in extracurricular activities, and (iii) the amount of educational materials in the home (Bodovski & Karkas 2009; Cheadle 2009; Cheadle & Amato, 2011; Lareau, Weineiger, Conley, & Velez, 2011). Similarly, some attempts have been made at measuring quantitatively the concept of intensive mothering (Liss, Schriffin, Mackintosh, Miles-McLean, & Erchull, 2012). However, there is also an acknowledgement that these indicators do not capture the full scope of these concepts. For example, existing measures do not fully capture parents' efforts to mobilize resources on behalf of their children nor their efforts to promote their children's sense of confidence and self-entitlement.

Parental Investment in Different Contexts

The second key issue is to expand the study of parental investment to more countries and to different political and institutional regimes. In particular, while the literature based on time-use data has been carried out in numerous countries, the literature on other dimensions of parental investment, and especially on concerted cultivation and intensive mothering, has been dominated by Anglo-Saxon countries. The point here is that while there are reasons to expect the phenomenon of intensive mothering not to be exclusive to the Anglo-Saxon world (see the discussion below), the actual expectations and norms of good mothering may well vary across contexts.

Driving Forces

Third, we need to better understand the driving forces behind the emergence of new ideologies of parenting and especially behind the growing polarization in parental investment in children. The recent literature in this field has identified three possible elements. First, recent decades have seen major changes in the economies of developed countries: changes that have fundamentally altered the economic context of childrearing. This includes increasing job instability, increasing uncertainties about the future, as well as increasing income inequality which, together, have made it more difficult for families, especially for middle-class families, to maintain their class status (Acs & Nichols 2010). The combination of these trends, it could be argued, may have prompted middle-class families to invest further in their children in order to prevent downward social mobility.

Second, there has been increasing knowledge about, and increasing visibility given to, the importance of early experiences and early stimulation for children's brain development. Popular magazines and psychology books have helped disseminated this scientific knowledge, turning the whole experience of parenting as a near "science project" (Apple 2006; Quirke 2006; Wall 2004, 2010). And again, middle-class parents appear to have been particularly susceptible to, and receptive of, this new knowledge and expectations regarding children's early years.

Finally, the emergence of a neoliberal ideology at the political level, ideology placing increasing responsibility on individuals, has also been argued to be adding to expectations of large parental investment in children (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). In particular, children's success has been increasingly viewed as being dependent on parents' skills and on their investment in their children. In contrast, bad parenting and a lack of parental investment have been viewed as being responsible for poverty and social disorder (Gillies, 2008). And while the new political rhetoric of "investing in children" may be suggesting a shift toward greater governmental support, observers have argued that it has mainly been used to further emphasize parental responsibility (Butler, 2010; Gillies, 2012).

Theoretically, these various societal changes (economy, knowledge, and politics) could be argued to have altered parental expectations and practices, especially by creating a climate of anxiety and personal responsibility. New research should however attempt to empirically test these theoretical propositions. In particular, if a childrearing strategy such as concerted cultivation is indeed prompted by increasing economic uncertainties, income inequalities, and neoliberal ideologies, its applicability should go well beyond the Anglo-Saxon world. Continued financial woes in Europe, and continued uncertainties for young adults and young families around the world, could be expected to be providing the impetus for more parental investment in children, especially by middle-class parents, in most of the developed world. This is an empirical hypothesis that still needs to be tested. Moreover, it would be important to examine more closely cross-national differences in parental investment since differences in family policies and state support for families could be posited to be associated with different expectations concerning the role of parents and the role of societal institutions.

THE DYNAMICS OF PARENTAL INVESTMENT

Finally, there is a need to examine the dynamic nature of parental investment, that is, to examine changes in parental investment as parents experience various transitions (e.g., divorce and remarriage) and as children grow up. In particular, while the current literature has provided us with is a picture of parental investment at one point in time, we lack a longitudinal perspective on how this investment changes over the life course of parents and children. One of the very few exceptions in the qualitative literature comes again from Lareau (2011) with the 10-year follow-up of her original study of class-based childrearing logics. Her findings confirmed the persisting importance of social class especially through middle-class parents' formal and informal knowledge of institutions of higher education, and through the continuous monitoring and guidance of their young adults. Working-class and poor parents were found to be providing "valuable emotional, financial, and social support for their children" (Lareau, 2011, p. 302) but were less well equipped to do so and tended to value more the autonomy of their young adults as compared to their middle-class counterparts.

CONCLUSION

That educated middle-class parents use specific strategies to transmit privileges to their children is not a new phenomenon. Yet, the social role of children, as well as the standards of good parenting (and good mothering), have changed considerably in recent decades. In the midst of growing economic uncertainties and growing income inequalities, large time, monetary, and emotional parental investments have been perceived as key for children's success. At the same time, resistance to this dominant model of good parenting has been emerging, together with concerns about its consequences on the well-being of parents (especially mothers) including anxiety and feeling of guilt (Sutherland, 2010).

The empirical literature on the ideologies and practices of parental investment has however been largely confined so far to specific countries and has been dominated by qualitative studies. More rigorous measurement of the concept of parental investment, as well as more extensive investigation of this concept in different contexts are needed in order to allow for a better understanding of some of the mechanisms and driving forces behind the increasing polarization in parental investment. At the same time, longitudinal studies are needed to examine the dynamics of parental investment and how class differences evolve as children grow up and as families experience various demographic and economic events. Only with such a better understanding of inequalities in parental investment can we start devising interventions and programs to better support parents and to start closing the social class gap in children's well-being and achievement.

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