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LANGUAGE, PARENTING, AND INEQUALITY

Bowen Paulte

It was perhaps above all a better feeling for academic writing that I learned from Nico Wilterdink during the years that he, along with Abram de Swaan, supervised my dissertation. Especially when it got down to crunch time, Nico engaged my writing one word at a time, and I remember several conversations we had about striking the right tone. It seems fitting, then, to consider now the relationship between language (i.e., specific words, tone) and a theme to which Nico has often returned: inequality. Examining research on this relationship brings us, of course, to parenting.

Focusing on how parent-child interactions influence language and cognitive development before children enter schools, Betty Hart and Todd Risley have produced some jaw-dropping findings.¹ With these in place we will move on to Annette Lareau's (2003) more recent research detailing how radically different types of parenting strategies continually impact the development of children long after they start going to school.²

Dividing families along the lines that gave them the most bang for their buck – i.e., in terms of professional, working class, and those families receiving welfare – Hart and Risley observed that, from 13 to 36 months, children born into professional families hear on average 382 different words per hour. Children in working-class families hear approximately 241. Truly disadvantaged youngsters hear, they indicate, roughly 167 words per hour. The same pattern holds for utterances per hour during these months. Among working-class family members, between 13 and 18 months as well as 35–36 months roughly half of all the feedback young children received was affirmative. In professional families, an affirmative tone was slightly more frequent. In the families on welfare, on the other hand, around 80 percent of the feedback from parents was negative during these early developmental phases. Not surprisingly, by age three the vocabulary sizes of 'professional' children (1,498) and 'working class' children (1,116) dwarfed that those of the products of 'welfare' families (525). Switching

to a more cumulative and dual-track perspective, the authors show that, by 36 months, the average middle class child can be expected to have heard around 500,000 encouragements and 80,000 discouragements. By contrast, lower class three-year olds have been exposed, on average, to roughly 75,000 encouragements and 200,000 discouragements.

Wait, it gets worse. Hart and Risley demonstrated that these stark differences seem to contribute mightily to observed IQ differences at 36 months: 117 for the typical middle class child, 79 for the average poor child. By the time they turn five, the typical child finding itself in a professional family will have heard roughly 20 million more words than the average child of the same age in a working-class family and around 35 million more than the five-year-old born into a 'welfare family'. Even in the most 'generous' European welfare states, no policy makers are even considering the types of efforts that might be expected – in a single generation – to close the gap between the least advantaged and the children of working class families (let alone to close the gap between the least advantaged and the children of professionals). As Hart and Risley conclude:

To ensure that an average welfare child had a weekly amount of experience equal that of the average child in a working-class family, merely in terms of hours of language experience of any kind (words heard), 41 hours per week of out-of-home experience as rich in words addressed to the children as that in an average professional home would be required (...) welfare children would need to be in substantial care 40 hours every week from birth onward.³

These are scary numbers. But even more frightening, perhaps, are the mental picture and gut feeling they provoke. No matter how they are grouped ethnically, compared to their better-off counterparts, the poorest of the poor may arrive in (the worst) public schools after having faced nearly solid blocks of negative energy – if not despondency – in the form of their parents and older siblings. Given the character of their repeated experiences, interaction rituals, and most fundamental relationships, perhaps we have to imagine the least advantaged entering the educational race with an arm, if not a leg, tied behind their backs.

Drawing from lush ethnographic interview data and direct observations scattered over many years, Lareau picks up the baton and reveals

how the unequal distribution of power chances manifesting in 'normal' family situations continues long after Hart and Risley's five-year-olds start school.⁴ While her calm and cogent account focuses mainly on 'middle' and 'working-class' parenting practices, she also reserves some attention for family life among the 'poor'.

Given what we have just seen, it will come as no surprise that – compared to working class and poor children – the vocabularies of Lareau's middle class children continued to grow substantially at home. Less predictable, perhaps, are what Lareau sees as the 'hidden advantages' that accrue to middle class children by virtue their comparatively 'extensive... relatively contained, bureaucratically regulated, and somewhat superficial relationship[s]' with adults.⁵ During soccer practice and while car-pooling on the way home from organized 'play dates' and away games outside the immediate residential environment – to take but a few examples – middle class children are forced to mix it up with (predominantly middle class) adults in a range of comparatively predictable, recurrent, and 'rationalized' encounters.⁶ Especially in this specific sense, what Lareau brings to life can be described, in Elias's idiom, in terms of the social constraint towards self-constraint. These privileged youth are absorbed in countless 'civilizing' experiences.

'Concerted Cultivation', is the label Lareau uses to identify the middle class childrearing practices continually bringing these types interactions into being. In relation to the set of strategies Lareau associates with working class childrearing (which she somewhat euphemistically refers to as 'The Accomplishment of Natural Growth'), what is most distinctive here is the way middle class parents ensure that their children lead highly structured and culturally enriching lives outside school. Because of their greater economic resources and mobility – but also because of their specifically cultural power resources and 'logic' – middle class parents remain deeply involved in the daily organization of after school (and sometimes even before school) activities as well as in the structuring and monitoring of activities during weekends and holidays. Lareau returns frequently to the negative aspects of the middle class approach (e.g., fatigue, too little 'down time', kids that expect to be entertained, the sense that one must keep up with the highly regimented and breakneck pace of the middle class 'Joneses'). She also returns time and again to the positive aspects of working class childrearing practices (e.g., the development of skills that develop

during unstructured play time, the formation of comparatively close-knit relationships within comparatively small and localized social networks, clearer boundaries that allow less space for annoyed and annoying middle class brats). But the title of the book – *Unequal Childhoods* – conveys the crux of the argument very well.

Lareau discusses situations in which race undeniably trumps class. In a subsection carrying the heading 'The Intersection of Race and Class', Lareau begins by recalling Cornell West's inability to hail a cab.⁷ She reminds readers that middle class African American men told her similar stories (e.g., a white woman clutching her purse and afraid to use cash machines in upscale neighborhoods). She notes that the social fact of race clearly influenced the lives of middle class black children. One little black boy, the son of a lawyer, was told that he was destined to become a garbage collector. There were a lot of these stories, and my aim is not to make light of them. No serious social scientist would deny that racial profiling and ethnic discrimination disrupt – and sometimes shatter – the lives of poor as well as advantaged people all the time. We all know, furthermore, that race matters in any number of other crucial, subtle, and oppressive ways. Alive to all of this, Lareau used the word 'race' in the book's main subtitle. Having said this, the intersection of race and class has almost nothing to do with the core of her substantive argument. Whether 'white' or 'of color', Lareau documents that economically and culturally more empowered parents tend to provide their children with an array of everyday experiences that help them in them immediately, in school, and in the longer term. In terms of the later, she emphasizes the competencies and poise that help with all types of middle class endeavors – such as, to take but one example, the confidence that 'naturally' leads one to look people in the eye while shaking their hands. See here the *je ne sais quoi* of doing well in job interviews and the 'stuff' that facilitates the maintenance of expansive social networks with non-marginalized adults.

But these are only the more obvious, easily communicated aspects of Lareau's social class-based arguments about family life and early socialization. Switching to more subtle examples, she also demonstrates the often deeply unconscious ways in which better-educated parents groom their children for success in school, higher education, and white-collar worlds of work. This brings us to the Socratic techniques for nurturing critical thinking skills, to the unquestioned self-confidence of child growing up

around adults with real mastery of a language, the taken for granted sense of entitlement that is 'communicated' through financial security and especially strong family support structures. Most importantly of all, perhaps, Lareau forces us to think about the cumulative effects of immersion in highly disciplined, 'systemic, predictable, and regulated' social setting – before and after privileged children enter middle class schools.⁸

Lareau demonstrated that working class and poor parents, by comparison, are far less financially or culturally equipped to offer their children regulated and enriching experiences. Working class parents allow their children not only to 'be kids' – which might indeed be enriching – but also, for example, to watch amounts of television that would be unimaginable for the average middle class parent. Instead of costly organized activities (at some remove from the residence), there is 'free' time – i.e., hour after hour of playing with other siblings, nieces, nephews, and other children from the neighborhood. Pulling few punches – and not even mentioning anything like 'black' or 'minority' culture – Lareau attributes the parenting practices of the less advantaged adults to the 'deadening quality of work and the press of economic shortages that defined their experience of adulthood and influenced their vision of childhood'.⁹ Compared to their middle class counterparts, working-class and poor parents had 'many more worries about basic issues: how to endure food shortages, get children to doctors despite a lack of reliable transportation, purchase clothing, and manage other life necessities'. Compared to their more privileged counterparts, the school-age children of working class and poor families tended to be subjected to massive levels of stress, insecurity, negativity and, above all, left to their own devices.

To a greater extent than many of us might have suspected, language may be central to processes of social reproduction. Furthermore, juxtaposing these two studies reveal that if we are to grasp more fully how inequality is reinforced, we need to wed insights into the distribution of chances to acquire linguistic capital with detailed investigations into the more and less civilizing practices of differently positioned parents. In other words, the findings brought to light by these studies seem to support Bourdieu's claims about the family-based transmission and embodiment of cultural (and, more specifically, linguistic and educational) capital.¹⁰ More specifically, these studies can be seen as validation of what Bourdieu had to say about 'general' (rather than 'specific') habitus formation.¹¹ No less impor-

tant, perhaps, are the connections to Elias's work centering on the 'social constraint towards [emotional] self-constraint'.¹² These linkages might be less intuitive, given that the authors of the studies reviewed above did not engage in long-term perspectives. However, despite the way in which Elias's investigations of '(de-)civilization' are often depicted, he certainly did not base his theory of habitus formation *exclusively* on long-term developments.¹³ In short, Elias and Bourdieu – the master sociologists that Nico Wilterdink so often discussed in his lectures and drew from as he formed research questions – offer powerful frameworks and specific tools for those of us inclined to help turn findings such as those surveyed in this essay into more advanced understandings of how inequality actually works.

Notes

- 1 Hart, B.M. and T.R. Risley (1995) *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing, pp. 176-180. Barton and Coley have examined the implications of Hart and Risley's research with a specific focus on educational inequality and policies to overcome it: Barton, P.E. and R.J. Coley (2008). *Windows on Achievement and Inequality*. Princeton: ETS.
- 2 Lareau, A. (2003) *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- 3 Hart and Risley 1995: 205.
- 4 Lareau 2003.
- 5 Ibidem, p. 244.
- 6 Ibidem, p. 247.
- 7 Ibidem, p. 240-41.
- 8 Ibidem, p. 247.
- 9 Ibidem, p. 249.
- 10 Cf. Bourdieu, P. (1991) *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Polity; Bourdieu, P. and J.-C. Passeron (1977 [1970]) *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*. London: Sage.
- 11 Cf. Bourdieu, P. (1986) The Forms of Capital. In J.G. Richardson (ed.) *Handbook of Theory of Research for the Sociology of Education*. New York: Greenwood Press, pp. 241-258; Bourdieu, P. (2000 [1997]) *Pascalian Meditations*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 164-7.

- 12 Elias, N. (1994 [1939]) *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilization*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 443.
- 13 Elias (1991) *The Society of Individuals*. Oxford: Blackwell; en – (1996) *The Germans. Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 301-402.