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A Six Part Essay Concerning Qualitative Methods and Unequal

Childhoods

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This six part essay will briefly examine the strengths and weaknesses of qualitative methods as well as some of the qualitative methods found in Annette Lareau's ethnology, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race and Family Life*. Part One of this essay will address the strengths and weaknesses of qualitative methods; Part Two will examine the main points and arguments in *Unequal Childhoods*; Part Three will examine the book's qualitative methods; Part Four will examine the strengths and weaknesses of Lareau's methods; Part Five will discuss the mixed methods approach to research as discussed in three articles from *Educational Researcher* and finally, in Part Six, I will provide brief analysis and a critique of the book.

Part One: Qualitative Methods Strengths and Weaknesses

The strengths and weaknesses of qualitative methods is a comparison that has been gaining researcher interest in the midst of more traditional quantitative studies. The advent of mixed methods seeks to bind the best parts of qualitative and quantitative methods into a deeper and broader understanding of issues in social sciences. The main strength of qualitative methods is a direct hands-on approach to inductively answer a why by doing the field work, asking questions and allowing interviews to drift beyond a set pattern of questions. Other strengths include the binding of analysis, observation and social phenomena (Bernard, 2002) within their natural settings in real time providing a direct perception of events. More strengths include the ability to change the intent of a study in the midst of the research or after the field work is complete as Annette Lareau demonstrated. Qualitative methods are usually inexpensive: Interviewing is cheap.

Weaknesses in qualitative research include ethical dilemmas when the researcher is too active as an observer or when as an interviewer the researcher too obviously directs a conversation to serve a pre-determined purpose. While qualitative methods “provide measures with greater validity than do survey and experimental measurements, which are often criticized as superficial and not really valid” (Babbie, 2001) field research can get too personal and judgmental and researchers need to be aware of their biases – colleagues and advisors can help in this regard – in order to do dispassionate descriptive research. Another weakness in qualitative methods is the inability to determine statistical significance or to find statistical descriptors for large populations (Bernard, 2002).

Part Two: Main Points and Arguments

Annette Lareau’s *Unequal Childhoods* employs the qualitative observation approach to help frame how parenting and childhood differ by social class. Lareau and her team observed, interviewed and interacted with nine and ten-year-old children from 12 families. Field notes were taken in the family home, during visits to doctors, inside two elementary schools and in other places the children frequented: Lareau and her field workers “did what the children did” (Lareau, 2005). Lareau argues in her book for two philosophical divisions of child rearing: “Concerted Cultivation: and the “Natural Accomplishment of Growth” (Lareau, 2003).

Concerted cultivation, in Lareau’s book, is a middle-class conceit where parents are directly involved in all aspects of childrearing. Parents support and evaluate their children’s abilities and create opportunities beyond the home to improve their child’s status in society. That involvement takes form in organizing extracurricular events, teaching their children how to argue against authority and to question the status quo. Parents also intervene on the behalf of their children in school and on the playing field to give an authoritative adult voice to their

children's needs. Middle-class parents also model behavior for their children so they will learn how to shake hands, look someone in the eye while speaking and how to become advocate in their own health care. All of those activities help build a child's self-esteem, vocabulary and sense of entitlement. Lareau concludes cultivated childrearing creates family burnout as well as a worker/boss relationship between parent and child which can result in a chilling of the warmer family core found in working-class and poor families. Cultivated children tend to be more tired, overscheduled, less creative and angrier than their working-class and poor counterparts. (Lareau, 2003)

Lareau claims working-class and poor families use the "natural accomplishment of growth" approach to childrearing which is a more hands-off approach compared to the middle-class. Working-class and poor children are allowed more independent free time than middle-class children and they determine on their own how that time is spent. Working-class and poor parents, Lareau argues, prefer to let their children develop in a spontaneous manner while the parents provide basics like food, love and shelter. The children discover and develop their talents. The world of working-class and poor children centers on home and school and rarely reaches cultivating experiences beyond the neighborhood. According to Lareau, natural growth children have stronger relationships with their siblings than cultivated children. Working-class and poor children are often too deferential to authority and tend to settle for what is available instead of what is possible.

Part Three: Qualitative Methods in the Book

Lareau's qualitative methods approach to *Unequal Childhoods* was to "develop an *intensive* [emphasis not added], realistic portrait of family life" (Lareau, 2003). Lareau and her team took extensive field notes and interacted with the children during doctor and dental visits,

soccer games, backyard playtime, television watching, school meetings, household family routines, music lessons and homework study sessions (Pearce, 2004). Lareau's group rode along during local trips in cars and on busses.

Lareau and her assistants wanted to create an intimate connection with the families so the observed would not view the researchers as observers. Lareau studied the families over a long period of time and on a frequent basis. Interviews always centered on the children even if the children were not present (Lareau, 2005). Lareau said this about her small sample in the Notes section of *Unequal Childhoods*:

Social scientists disagree over the proper way to measure inequality in the real world.

Some take a gradational approach: on the basis of the key elements of inequality – especially occupational prestige, education, and income – they rank individuals or families in a relatively seamless hierarchy. Yet occupations differ greatly, particularly in the amount of autonomy workers enjoy, the degree to which some people supervise others, the pay, the cleanliness or dirtiness of the work performed, and the amount of prestige at the job commands. I think of these differences in nongradational terms. (p. 260)

Lareau paid each family \$350 for participation in the study. She gave the children \$5.00 tucked into holiday cards and baked pies for the families as an ongoing thank you during the observation period. At the end of the study she provided pizza parties as a celebration that “only the poor kids appreciated” (Lareau, 2005). Those small totems of appreciation came close to crossing an ethical line between observation and insinuation as discussed in Part Four.

Part Four: Strengths and Weaknesses

When I interviewed Annette Lareau on February 10, 2005, there was a sense of melancholy and sadness in her voice as she discussed her work on *Unequal Childhoods*. We touched on many topics during our conversation and she became animated when she talked about her car breaking down and her tone was angry when she related her teaching load at Temple University. When the conversation turned back to her book there was always an underlying tone of defeat that suggested her book may hold great contradictions for her: *Unequal Childhoods* is finished, but incomplete in her mind as a reader and while the book was a great opportunity it was not fully realized in her heart as a scholar.

Even though Lareau had a small sample and no outliers or “deviant cases” (Lareau, 2003) she was still overwhelmed by the enormity of the task studying the lives of 12 families. She took a majority of the field notes and with 10% of the study remaining she had to hire a project manager to finish the observations because she was burned out (Lareau, 2005). The Marshall family only allowed three visits – other families allowed more than 12 visits – and that limited access hurt the study because the Marshalls were middle-class, Black and affluent. More exposure to the Marshalls might have helped Lareau address some of the well-reasoned criticism of *Unequal Childhoods* that appeared in a *Social Forces* review (Pearce, 2004):

One unsatisfying feature of the book is its limited discussion of race’s role in shaping childhood and framing futures. Lareau argues that social class is more determinative of the organization and experience of childhood than race. In her study, middle-class black children’s lives are organized more similarly to middle-class white children’s lives than to poorer black children’s lives. However, one similarity across class categories is that black children all encounter racism. Mention is made of how black children and parents

in each class category face discrimination. These confrontations with race make childhood and how children see their futures different for black and white children regardless of class. Further, the interesting dynamic may be less in comparing the relative impact of two closely intertwined social forces and more about how the two intersect. For example, do middle-class black parents make a more “concerted” effort to teach their children strategies for dealing with racism than working-class or poor black parents? Also, does either child rearing approach seem more or less beneficial as it interacts with the child’s race? (p. 1662-1663)

Lareau’s acceptance of the feedback from the 97 first readers who felt her book was another “culture of poverty” (Lareau, 2005) study is commendable. Instead of staying with her original angle on the book, Lareau rewrote the ethnography with a quasi-quantitative methods approach using the same data set – her field notes – and reprocessing the notes with a different intent to create a new result: Concerted cultivation. Lareau manipulated her data in the same manner a quantitative methods researcher might manipulate data in SPSS to provide a new perspective using the same base data. Lareau’s new concerted result cannot be quantified statistically but the inspiration to use quantitative methods to reassess qualitative data is impressive and suggestive of the strength of mixed methods.

Part Five: The Mixed Methods Approach

Qualitative methods offers researchers depth of subject but those methods also suffer from a lack of quantitative breadth. The mixed methods approach is one way to simultaneously have the hole and the horizon. While Lareau’s study might have benefited from quantitative analysis that would “add precision to words” and “test a grounded theory” (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) while also discovering “how, why and when a program works” (Chatterji,

2004) as well as how “causation implies that causality can never be identified in single events or cases, only through repeated observations of a relationship between two variables or event” (Maxwell, 2004), but Lareau ran out of time and money and effort (Lareau, 2005). It is difficult for a “single researcher to carry out both qualitative and quantitative research” while learning “about multiple methods and approaches how to mix them appropriately” (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) so a mixed methods approach to *Unequal Childhoods* is not a realistic expectation for that sort of ethnography.

Part Six: Critique and Analysis

Annette Lareau created an excellent ethnography with the publication of *Unequal Childhoods*. “Interpretation is messy, hard stuff” (Sadovnik, 2005) and I appreciate knowing her book is “the strongest of the ethnographic studies” (Sadovnik, 2005) considered in our course.

The *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* (Glotzer, 2005) said this about the book:

Traditional *middle class* [emphasis not added] criticisms about the use of corporal punishment and authoritarian parenting styles pale before the issues of family violence, sexual abuse and hard scrabble of subsistence living that some contemporary families endure. Yet through all this Lareau also found that kinship and family still provide important social and economic support for families. Fractured as many families are, cousins, aunts and uncles, still provide a valuable network of extended family, perhaps more so than for their affluent counterparts. (p. 153)

I have not read a lot of ethnographies so it is difficult for me to compare and contrast *Unequal Childhoods* against a history of what already exists and then evaluate Lareau’s successes and failures. I was bothered some of the observations appeared to cross the delicate ethical line between observer and friend and it appeared at times some of the researchers wanted

to be liked by the children instead of being neutral and unobtrusive. I am also concerned that Lareau's inability or unwillingness to sever emotional ties with the poor children is unhealthy for both her and for the children. Lareau demonstrated intent can change over time to find success but there are instances when an original intent must be honored. For example, Lareau's intent at the start of her study was not to befriend poor children for the rest of her life. The field study is complete but a decade later Lareau is still enmeshed in the lives the poor children. She intentionally cultivated an ongoing association with the children by continuing to send money and gifts for their babies while still having a research relationship with them. According to her 10 year update, Lareau plans to create an epilogue in a future edition of the book describing how the children are doing as adults.

I understand the heartfelt longing the poor children have for Lareau because their participation in the study "was the first time someone took an interest in their lives" (Lareau, 2005), but as a scholar Lareau created inappropriate cravings for comfort and connectivity in her subjects and that should not be an intent of ethical research. There may be times when humanity must triumph over ethics but that should only be considered in matters imminent danger.

Lareau's book is well-researched but not as well-written as Elijah Anderson's *Code of the Street* but, unlike Anderson, Lareau does not invent drama (Backstrand, 2005) for her readers: "This account of 'Tyree's Story' is based on an extended ethnographic interview. It is dramatized in places to represent vividly the intricacies of the code of the street" (Anderson, 1999). An ethnographic study should not set the stage for an invented system of believing.

Lareau's endnotes are more detailed and more humanly satisfying than Anderson's. The most interesting tales Lareau tells (Lareau, 2005) appear between pages 289-311 in her Notes where she removes her scholar's mask and bares the face of her foibles, sufferings and dreams.

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