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A Summer 2020 Research Experience: Parenting Approaches during Unprecedented Times

Previous to the beginning of my summer research, I was unaware of how the project would impact my perspective and experience of 2020's unprecedented events. When Professor Stewart offered me the opportunity to join her research team in January, I believed that the project was perfect for me to participate in. Initially, the research was aimed towards investigating how race factored into interracial couples' life choices, such as their children's schooling. Professor Stewart's research excited me. I had recently completed my research methods course in the previous semester, and thoroughly enjoyed my experience conducting a Hamilton-based study. Learning of this opportunity, I was eager to acquire more formal interviewing experience since we would be recruiting parents, rather than my fellow students. I looked forward to honing the skills necessary for sociologists while a part of this research, such as coding and transcribing. Also, as a Black student, I make an effort to integrate topics surrounding race in my academic agenda. In this case, I was especially enthusiastic because the research project provided me with my first sociology project that would integrate my race.

Unfortunately, due to the uncertain social climate caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, my predictable research experience deviated completely. Our research plans were influenced by the global health crisis, forcing us to adapt our topic and methods. We explored a new subject that was more relevant to the year's social context: our redeveloped project focuses on the experience of parents whose children are in third through fifth grade, and how they were

managing school and care work for their children during the pandemic. We were interested in analyzing any changes to families' routines as well as their overall experience adjusting to lifestyle changes established by the pandemic, such as the stay at home order and mandated remote learning. Despite the obstacles that the year's unforeseen circumstances posed for our study, I was still able to locate a passion in our adjusted scope of research while devoting my time to a project that I feel is critical to this unique moment in history.

Our study is based on survey data and interviews conducted with parents of children in third, fourth, and fifth grade. Participating households live in adjacent small towns within our target northeastern region. We utilized snowball sampling for recruitment, securing participants through our survey's advertisements, then asking them to share our study's information with their networks. We measured social class using parents' education and occupational status. Our sample is composed of nineteen middle class white mothers and one middle class white father. Interviews were conducted over phone or Zoom, and ranged from thirty minutes to an hour. During interviews, we focused on any changes regarding childcare, employment, housework and social networks due to the pandemic. Also, interviews evaluated parents' perceptions of how their children's school handled the transition into remote learning and quality of online instruction. Social class variance was explored during interviews as well, using fictional scenarios parents were asked to provide resolutions to different scenarios as if the child in question was their own. Interviews were transcribed and coded by our project's three research assistants, myself, Hope Medina and [Kaja Bielecka](#).

Although social-political contexts inevitably influence research, this year proved to be a unique and challenging time to conduct our study, due to restrictions regarding quarantine and the protests against police brutality during the summer. Our team was very fortunate to be able to

proceed with our summer research as planned, considering that we were not able to return to campus for the study as we had hoped. Because of these circumstances, we prepared to conduct our research remotely while dealing with the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic that extended into the summer. Living in such a populated metropolitan area such as Boston created an inescapable atmosphere of anxiety concerning my family's health, especially since one of my sisters is a healthcare worker on the frontline. Along with the immediate stressors in my household, my family also worried about my distant, at-risk grandparents who were stuck in Trinidad due to the borders closing.

Aside from my pandemic-induced worries during the course of our research, I was also plagued by the social unrest motivated by the killing of George Floyd and subsequent acts of police brutality occurring at related protests. Like the anxiety related to COVID-19, the rage, fear, and disgust I experienced during the constant broadcasting of violence against Black people, and their allies, was unavoidable. I remember being unable to focus on my annotated bibliography the week before interviewing started due to the protests in my own city. While I was trying to prepare myself for our upcoming virtual interviews, I struggled to make sense of my current reality as a Black person in America. Not only was the coronavirus fatally affecting Black communities at a disproportionate rate, but mask mandates posed a new danger for non-whites as people experienced racial profiling when they covered their faces, or excessive force from police and other civilians when they did not. During this time, I was torn between what I believed to be my responsibility to protest and the possibility of exposure to the virus if I did attend a rally--all while preparing for the formal beginning of our research.

Despite the combined stress and fear caused by the pandemic and protests, I tried my best to focus on my research responsibilities. In doing so, I found that the chaotic social

environment influenced my approach to my personal research project. Considering the extremified discrimination that people of color were facing, I became interested in how the pandemic affected low-income Black, Brown and Asian Americans differently than their middle-class and white counterparts. Thinking about how low income people of color make up the majority of essential workers in America led me to expect a significant discrepancy in pandemic experiences in regards to race and class. I expected to find prominent variation in the ways in which parents from different race and class backgrounds experienced adjustments to their employment, as well as how they managed their children's at-home care and schooling. The injustice of non-white people on the public sphere during the summer motivated me to use our research opportunity to further analyze discrepant obstacles that low income people of color face on an intimate level due to the pandemic's conditions.

As the beginning of our research approached, I became nervous about how my Blackness would be perceived while conducting interviews with upper class white parents. As someone who had only interviewed fellow Hamilton students, I already felt anxious interviewing the parents of our sample before the social climate contributed to my agitation. Considering that our target region's population has a white majority, I worried about the possibility of a participant's negative perspectives surrounding the protests surfacing in my interviews. I remember immediately checking the political views of the first participant assigned to me, and unjustly feeling hesitant about our interview because of their partner's indicated political affiliation. Despite the conversations I had with family and peers, I was unable to shake the looming unease around "zooming while Black," as people who looked like me were being demonized by the media during the protests. I wondered if I would be perceived differently than

my fellow team members, and if, despite that possibility, I was comfortable enough to continue with the experience.

Fortunately, during my first interview, there was a mutual sense of relief that alleviated my worries regarding the perception of my race. Interviewing Rebecca made me realize that while protests and violence divided society to an extent, the ongoing pandemic prompted a unifying struggle which added a therapeutic aspect to our interview. The lack of references to the protests eased my nerves, allowing my excitement about the experience to return. Throughout our conversation, I could tell that Rebecca genuinely appreciated the opportunity to share her quarantine experience. It felt rewarding to conduct interviews during a time that people were distant from their social networks, as if I was validating the highs and lows of their concealed at-home experiences. As a kindergarten teacher and mother of two, Rebecca was able to provide a dual-perspective of her pandemic experience:

“I think being a teacher gives me a little bit of an advantage, you know, just teaching kids in general. Whereas other parents are like ‘I never signed up to be a teacher, I have no idea what to do with my kids here,’ but I know we’re all in this together in different ways.”

Rebecca routinely spanned from her personal experience and empathized with other families who were not as fortunate as her, in terms of finances and pandemic circumstances, such as being able to work from home and monitor her children. Her insight that “we’re all in this together in different ways,” empowered me as a researcher, considering I had approached the interview feeling somewhat alienated. Though she was unaware of her effect on me, Rebecca reinstated my confidence as a researcher and aided me in realizing a larger significance to our project: our interviews allowed us to tether household experiences into its true collective state.

Although we struggled to secure a diverse sample, the immediate interests I formed from conducting and transcribing my first interviews relied heavily on race and class comparisons.

After my conversation with Rebbecca, I approached the rest of my interviews with refreshed vigor. As expected, the rest of my interviews left me with the same empowering impression as Rebbecca's--especially as I began to detect trends among participants. Since the majority of our first respondents were middle class white parents, I noticed the same tendency of people acknowledging their privilege of circumstances compared to others. And though we struggled to acquire lower class and non-white participants to compare the middle class experience to, I quickly developed a number of interesting themes that set the stage for later comparison. I found parents' varying attitudes, readiness and approaches to the homeschooling aspect of remote learning extremely interesting. For example, one aspect of the middle class at-home experience I noticed was middle class parents' ability, and eagerness, to supplement their children's remote learning with experiential learning, or subjects unrelated to their child's core curriculum. James' explanation of how his household approached their "unintentional homeschooling" pointed to the trend's possible relation to class:

“I am a physicist, my wife is a lawyer, my mom- we've got degrees in knowledge that we've just been trying to execute on our kids. Our house is like a science fair-it is a science fair. Uh you know we would just tackle some stuff, like ask them oh what do you want to learn about today? Let's learn about this! We'd try to contact relatives to teach them about things, like addressing an envelope and sending letters... more real life learnings... We did a lot of stuff like art--mom had a pretty healthy unit on art where [the kids] would pick an artist, learn about that artist and try to draw like that artist. Um you know it was fun, it was nice to do a bit of homeschooling for a while.”

In this excerpt, James' justification of his excitement for the opportunity to homeschool his children lied in the “degrees in knowledge” acquired by the adults in their immediate family. This explanation provided a direct nod to a class connection, considering that our study measures class using educational attainment. During the time that their children's school was less instructive due to their ongoing remote transition, James and his partner's proactive approach to

educating their children stood out to me since their “homemade curriculum” seemed to rely heavily on their human capital, such as their higher education and finances to fund their children’s science and art projects. James’ active focus on implementing practical knowledge and “real life learnings” in his children, as well as his kids’ agency in choosing “what to learn about today” inspired my first basis for a possible class comparison. Thinking about lower class families’ possible contribution to their child’s at home learning, I wondered if the inflexible work schedules characteristic of this class would allow parents to invest as much time into creative projects for their children as James, or if lower class parents had leisure time, and comfort, to do such activities if they were essential workers. Also, I was eager to analyze whether or not education levels influenced the variety and purpose of children’s at home activities during quarantine.

Another theme that I identified as a possible point for class comparison concerned the quality of communication between the school and parents during quarantine. When parents were asked to evaluate their school’s transition to remote learning, parents generally described schools as being prepared or unprepared for the transition, as well as supportive or unsupportive in terms of communication and problem solving. Throughout our sample I noticed a cluster of parents from the same elementary school, Harrisburg elementary, commending the high quality transition and communication they experienced. While some parents received little guidance or format for their children’s remote learning, some parents at Harrisburg recognized procedures weren’t optimal, but remained patient. Amy explained the personal effort teachers and officials at her the school:

“[my daughter’s] teacher personally dropped everything off to everybody’s house, so, in that respect, [town] is so close-knit and it’s such a nice community. Like the superintendent- well, we didn’t need one-but he dropped off himself the Chromebooks to a lot of houses that needed them. I know a lot of teachers

personally bring things to the home, but I don't know if that's what happens normally in a much bigger school district."

Parents praised the personal support their school district provided, citing the superintendent's and teacher's intimate efforts to help families--which seemed possible due to Harrisburg elementary's small district. I was interested in Amy's speculation of whether or not there were such intimate interactions between the school and families in larger school districts, considering that low income families were more likely to populate larger, urban districts. Even without low income families' experience, I was able to compare the Harrisburg experience to a somewhat larger district experience using middle class parents whose children attended Greenville Elementary. Parents with kids in this larger school district did not receive intimate assistance from their school and its administrators. James' experience with Greenville Elementary School is a stark contrast to the parents of Harrisburg's:

"It took them about a month before they got things figured out, and in that month we transitioned from basically nothing. Teachers would email us every now and then but they would basically say we have no guidance, no advice but this is some fun things you can do, we aren't grading anything right now but here are some activities."

The significant discrepancy between Greenville and Harrisburg's transition into remote learning piqued my interest further regarding parents' experiences in large districts since there are larger and more diverse districts in our target region than Greenville's. While I predicted it would be challenging for the superintendents of larger school districts to personally deliver laptops to students' homes, I was more so interested in how teacher's provided support for families during the remote transition. I expected lower class families to experience less intimate interactions because of the larger amount of students, as well as

the distant relationships with schools that, according to previous research, are characteristic of lower class families (Clarco 2014, Lareau 2003).

Due to the difficulty our team experienced recruiting a diverse sample, I adjusted my project, comparing our sample's reported behaviors and previous research observations to analyze deviations among middle class parenting trends during the pandemic. Our team recognized the importance of securing a varied sample to understand how the pandemic affected people of different races and classes differently. Despite Professor Stewart's numerous attempts to spread our study's information to the lower class community of our target region, the ventures were unsuccessful. Because my initial interests relied on the class and race comparison of our sample, I needed to refocus my project. I realized that I could still pursue one of my initial interests by focusing solely on the middle class experience. Instead of comparing different interactions and experiences with the school by class and race, I use previous research observations to analyze any differences, and consistencies, between our data and pre-pandemic middle class educational approaches. The basis for my analysis is rooted in the findings of two studies: Annette Lareau's "Invisible Inequality: Social Class and Childrearing in Black Families and White Families" and Jessica Calarco's "Coached for the Classroom: Parents' Cultural Transmission and Children's Reproduction of Educational Inequalities."

In her 2002 study, Annette Lareau counters the arguments of previous child-rearing literature that claim social class has little impact on varying parenting styles. Using interviews and classroom observations, Lareau produces conceptual umbrellas that allow for a comparison of child-rearing practices across class lines. Lareau identifies "three dimensions" that dominate the rhythm of family life throughout her ethnographic

observations: the organization of daily life, language use, and the social connections of a family. According to her evidence, and in line with her predictions, each of these dimensions significantly differed across class lines. Lareau found that regardless of race, middle class families adopt a “concerted cultivation” child rearing style. This type of parenting includes encouraging entitlement and normalizing negotiations in children, utilizing relationships with professionals, as well as enrolling kids in various organized activities.

One dimension of Lareau’s observations that is especially relevant to my research is the class-patterned institutional interactions. According to her evidence, families’ interactions with institutions, such as doctor offices and schools, differed across class lines. These differences are rooted in the varying attitudes that parents of different classes maintain towards middle-class institutional professionals, which in turn, they instill in their children. Lareau found that working class parents are cautious and reserved around professionals, due to their sometimes strained and distant relationships with institutions. Relationships with professionals are often generic and uncomfortable. In contrast, Middle class parents customize relationships with professionals, due to their comfort with other adults from their shared social class. These parents encourage their children to ask professionals questions, teaching their kids that institutions exist to serve them and that they are *entitled* to help. Such instruction socializes middle class children to adopt a feeling of entitlement toward institutions and prepare them for comfort with adults in higher education. For my research, I use these observations of the middle class’ sense of entitlement towards institutions to evaluate whether or not our sample’s families have

adapted their expectant attitudes toward their child's school due to the pandemic's conditions.

In "Coached for the Classroom: Parents' Cultural Transmission and Children's Reproduction of Educational Inequalities," Calarco observes different class-based problem solving strategies that parents reinforce in their children. According to her evidence, Middle class families adopt a "by any means necessary" problem solving strategy. Motivated by their in-depth understanding of the school's expectations, they teach their children to ask questions to receive any type of help they need. Middle class parents emphasize the notion that teachers exist to serve their children, encouraging requests for accommodation. Working class families teach their children a "no excuses" approach to problem solving, due to their own requests for help being perceived as disrespectful when they were in school. Because working class parents do not have time to volunteer at their child's school, and misunderstand that requesting help is encouraged, these parents reinforce their dated understanding of the student-teacher relationship. Working class children are encouraged to struggle and figure things out themselves, believing that hard work is a part of the education experience. Working class families tend to believe that the school knows what is best for their children, compared to middle class families who believe they know what is best for their children and have the human capital to voice their disagreements with the school. My project uses Calarco's evidence to evaluate whether or not middle class parents' comfort levels towards interacting with their child's school has changed.

Although I had to adjust the focus of my project to solely analyze the middle class, the trends I observed point to areas for necessary future research regarding working class

parents' experience with the school during the pandemic. To guide my analysis of any deviations in middle class approaches to their children's education, I utilized the fictional scenario responses collected during interviews. Fictional scenarios is a model that other scholars, such as Jessica Calarco, have used to measure class patterned themes. In our research, we use fictional scenarios for the same means. Because our sample consists solely of middle class parents, this data can be used to evaluate consistency in middle class parenting trends during the pandemic, in relation to previous research. When presented with a scenario, parents were asked to respond with their reaction as if the child were their own. There were three scenarios included in our interview guide, concerning Tommy, Isaiah, and Grace. For my analysis, I use the data collected from Isaiah and Grace's scenarios because they measure parents' comfort levels interacting with their child's school for clarification and accommodation respectively.

Responses to Isaiah's vignette represent parents' comfort contacting schools for help on an assignment. Considering Calarco findings, middle class parents should indicate comfort contacting the school for assistance since, through their strong bonds with the school, they understand that school encourages parents to vocalize their academic needs. Based on Lareau's observations, middle class parents should feel comfortable asking their children's teachers about academic aid because parents are of the same social class as teachers. Also, both researchers' findings maintain that the middle class sense of entitlement contributes to these parents' comfort seeking assistance from their children's school. The following table reports respondents' answers to Isaiah's scenario.

Table 2. Summary of Open-Ended Responses to Vignette 2

Scenario 1: Isaiah, a 4th grader, is working on the school packet his teacher sent home for him to complete while his school is shut due to COVID-19. Isaiah opens the packet but doesn't

understand what he is supposed to do to complete the assignment. He asks his mom, but she is also confused on what Isaiah is expected to do.

Prompt: What do you think should happen with Isaiah?

Descriptive Response Categories	Respondents
Isaiah's parents should email the teacher for clarification.	14*
Isaiah should email the teacher.	5
Total	19

Note: Responses to fictional scenarios were open ended. Descriptive response categories were created after coding for trends in responses.

With the majority of respondents claiming that they would email Isaiah's teacher for clarification, the parents of our sample behave in alignment with the observations of Calarco and Lareau. Despite the physical distance between middle class parents and schools, parents' levels of comfort contacting their child's institution are unphased. Throughout our sample, a number of parents drew connections between their comfort asking schools for help and the time they invested volunteering at the school. Patricia expresses her relief, having formed a pre-pandemic bond with her child's school:

“Anytime we’ve had any confusion I have emailed the teacher and just asked for clarification and they usually get right back to me...they’re so great. They’re so kind, and warm, and it was nice, ya know, I’m glad we didn’t start with this. We started kind of knowing them, we’ve had a parent-teacher conference with them. I go in and volunteer in the classroom, so I know them all at this point.”

The link that Patricia draws between her comfort asking the school for help and the time she spent “volunteer[ing] in the classroom,” nods to Calarco's observations. Our research's evidence shows that not only does this extra time in the classroom, that working class parents are unable to invest, aid the middle class in understanding teacher's

expectations, but it also makes them feel more comfortable contacting them on behalf of their child. This finding is enough to raise concern about working class families' experiences with managing their child's education during the pandemic. According to previous research, before the pandemic, lower class parents already felt disconnected from teachers and uncomfortable with the level of intimacy that middle class parents interact with the school. If our evidence indicates that middle class parents acknowledge the benefits of their strong pre-pandemic bonds with their children's schools, it is important to highlight the possibility of lower class families struggling from their lack of close bonds with the school--as well as how this lack of a relationship may affect their child's academic performance.

Responses to Grace's vignette indicate parents' methods for problem solving regarding a specific remote learning issue. Although remote learning problem solving is unique to post-pandemic parenting, this vignette evaluates if parents' comfort requesting accommodation applies in new academic situations unique to the pandemic. Considering Calarco observations, middle class parents interpret academic interactions through the logic of entitlement. During her observations, parents often intervened for support and accommodation and expected to reap benefits by academically interceding for their children. Calarco's analysis suggests that middle class parents are comfortable requesting accommodation from the school because they perceive themselves as having equal or greater status to teachers. According to Lareau's observations, the value placed on negotiation as well as cultivating a sense of entitlement motivates parents to feel comfortable demanding the support they desire. The following table reports parents' responses to Grace's scenario.

Table 3. Summary of Open-Ended Responses to Vignette 3

Scenario 3: Grace is a 4th grader whose school has closed due to COVID-19. Grace’s teacher has provided take-home lessons and assignments for students that are available online. Despite the school reassuring Grace that she will not be penalized for being unable to complete assignments because the family doesn’t have reliable internet access at home, Grace is worried about falling behind.

Prompt: What do you think should happen with Grace?

Descriptive Response Categories	Respondents
Grace’s parents should request accommodations for Grace.	8
Grace’s parents and/or teacher should reassure Grace about her grades.	6
Grace should try her best and persevere through her internet issues.	5
Total	19

Note: Responses to fictional scenarios were open ended. Descriptive response categories were created after coding for trends in responses.

Considering that the majority of respondents indicated that they would request accommodations for Grace, the middle class parents of our sample seem to have maintained their comfort with seeking extra support for their children. Despite different schools' efforts and struggles providing a feasible curriculum for their students during the sudden transition to remote learning, middle class parents continue to feel comfortable requesting adjustments and extra help from the school--suggesting their consistent sense of entitlement. For example, Rebecca expressed comfort convincing Grace’s school to provide resources that are available in other districts:

“I would have to somehow push for the school to provide the hotspots that I know districts went and bought. I would somehow get that for her if I was a parent. And I would hope that the school would do something to accommodate those families.”

Rebecca's response suggests that she is willing to resist any pushback from the school in her fictional venture for accommodation, as she claims she would "push" the school to provide hotspots and "somehow get that for [Grace]. Her attitude indicates not only a comfort approaching and resisting the school, but also a sense of entitlement to accommodation that other families in *different* districts receive. Similarly, Katherine mentioned that she would secure additional weekly meetings for Grace with her teacher:

"Grace should have once-a-week phone conversations with her teacher, where they go over the work that she has completed in the packet, where she can ask any questions if she has any and she should take pictures of her completed work and submit it via cell phone."

Like Rebecca, Katherine's answer suggests high levels of comfort requesting regular accommodation for her child, especially since she would seek weekly extra support as well as a modified method of submission. Again, considering the consistent approaches to education among the middle class, and how these tendencies appear to work in favor for middle class children, worries me concerning the working class experience. In Calarco's research, she observed that working class parents are not as willing or comfortable requesting extra aid from institutions. In these times of remote learning, seeking accommodation and clarification seem critical, considering the often unclear expectations and assignments prevalent during schools' transition to remote learning. Working class parents' "by any means necessary" problem solving strategy encourages their children to struggle through challenges, a feat that may have detrimental effects during remote learning--considering that teachers are even more distant from working class children who already tend to be silent strugglers. Since our evidence demonstrates a pattern of middle class parents' pre-pandemic approaches to academic issues benefiting

them during remote learning, it is imperative that future research invests time into exploring whether or not working class parents, and children, experience worsened struggles due to their pre-pandemic problem solving trends.

Although I was unable to explore the topics that originally interested me when I approached this research, the delay allowed me to build a commitment to Professor Stewart's long term research. Due to my inability to immediately analyze evidence from a working class sample, I was motivated to continue this research with Professor Stewart as an independent study in the fall 2020 semester, as well as winter research for the Levitt Center. I thank my delayed access to my demographic of interest for the in-depth knowledge I have about the middle class and working class' distinct relationships to the school and their school district.

Over the past seven months that I have participated in this research, I have read many studies about working class interactions with educational institutions while I anxiously awaited the chance to access my ideal sample. Because of this extra time to build my understanding of parents and the school, I now believe that I am more sensitive to the nuances and implications of different aspects in the working class academic experience than I would have been if I completed the project as I had hoped in the summer. I am grateful for this experience, as I remember the sociologist who was anxious about the perception of her race in the summer. I am proud that I have committed myself to the research as long as I have, considering that in January of 2021, I will finally be able to analyze and acknowledge the experiences of those I hoped to prioritize when I accepted this research opportunity.

Works Cited

Calarco, Jessica. 2014. "Coached for the Classroom: Parents' Cultural Transmission and Children's Reproduction of Educational Inequalities." *American Sociological Review*

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