

**BEYOND STRUCTURE VERSUS CULTURE:
CLASS-SPECIFIC PARENTING PRACTICES IN HONG KONG**

Lee Trevor Tsz-lok

The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong,
e-mail: lee.trevor@gmail.com
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-8081-720X

Abstract. Growing inequality within and across the advanced capitalist countries has been among the top concerns of both social scientists and politicians today. An extensive literature on class stratification shows that parental influence on child outcomes is crucial for sustaining class inequality. However, the mechanism underlying the class effects is far from conclusive. One main debate in the existing literature centers on a question of whether class-specific parenting practices in reproducing inequalities is cultural or structural-the ‘cultural logic of childrearing’ (Lareau, 2011) or class resources play a pivotal role in the class disparities. Alternatively, this study adopts Sewell’s (1992) concept of the multiplicity of structures to understand how both cultural and structural elements of the class processes are interrelated. In addition, the class difference of parenting in the context of Hong Kong has been under-researched. Notably characterized by the hyper-competitive and hybrid cultural educational context, and the deeply unequal society, the Hong Kong case can be an analytical leverage for the cross-cultural comparison of class-specific parenting practices. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 15 Chinese parents in Hong Kong, therefore, the present study is to analyze complex processes in which social class shapes parenting values and practices.

The preliminary findings of this on-going study point to the subtle differences of parental values and practices in relation to class positions. Regardless of class backgrounds, all the parent respondents emphasized the intensive parenting to greater or lesser degree. Their values in parenting were rather ambivalent. On the one hand, they had high aspirations for their children’s future educational attainment (at least completing a university education). As a result, both middle-class parents and parents from the lower class tended to use a similar set of intensive parenting strategies to foster their children’s cognitive and noncognitive development. On the other hand, they also valued a fulfilling and happy life for their children. At times, these two types of values are conflicting with each other when being put into practice. Middle-class parents were more likely to see them as a matter of *choice* between a more intensive parenting and a more hands-off one. Conversely, due to the resources limitation, most lower-class parents were

struggling with the academic demands of intensive parenting strategies. When they found that they failed to have the desired impact on their children's academic outcomes, they tended to interpret that as a 'fate' or as a result of placing a high value on child's happiness. In other words, despite that they may be similar in their attempts to foster their children in an intensive parenting style, middle-class parents and lower-class parents from the lower class tended to have different ways to make sense of their parenting experiences and struggles.

Keywords: parenting; social class; inequality; Hong Kong

Introduction

Growing inequality today, perhaps more complicated than in previous decades, has attracted academic and policymakers' attention worldwide (Savage et al., 2013). As part of the wider debates on inequality, there is almost a consensus among social scientists that social class is the main predictor of educational achievement in societies across the globe (e.g., Johnston, 2007). In Hong Kong, educational transitions and educational achievements including attainment in higher education are evidently class-based, even after the expansion of higher education and large-scale educational reform over the past decades (Wu, 2007; Tsang, 1997; Lee & Chiu, 2016; Wong & Koo, 2016). One question that sociologists and others have long been interested in is to examine how parents play an important role in class inequalities-how the interplay of parents' resources, strategies, and values shape their child-rearing practices and child outcomes in school (Chin & Phillips, 2004; Irwin & Elley, 2013). One of the main arguments from the existing literature about the stability of class positions is that parents transmit educational advantages or disadvantages onto their children, not only through financial resources and social networks, but also through socializing them to hold particular values, habits, and aspirations that are rewarded, or otherwise, in the educational system (Bourdieu 1984; Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Devine, 2004; Reay 1998; Hamilton, 2016).

Notably, an extensive literature on how parenting strategies matter for children's success emerges around Lareau's work (2003; 2011) seminal study of the longitudinal ethnography tracing the trajectories of children from different class backgrounds growing up. It evidently shows the importance of the middle-class parenting style in children's educational experiences and prospects by cultivating children's cognitive and non-cognitive skills. Along the lines of Lareau's work, Calarco (2014) suggests that middle-class children in primary schools feel more comfortable to ask for help in the classroom and are better able to interact with their teachers. Such dispositions and behaviors of middle-class children tend to persist into

high school (Carolan, 2015), and even university, where middle-class students are found to be better skilled and at ease in engaging faculty during their university studies (Jack, 2016). The parental influence is also found crucial for the evolving process of career development and choice among adolescents and young adults (Irwin, 2017).

Nonetheless, the explanatory mechanisms underlying the class effects are far from conclusive. For instance, there has been a debate yet to be resolved over whether the parenting-related class inequalities are cultural or structural (Bennet, Lutz & Jayaram, 2012; Freeman, Condrón & Steidl, 2019). Concerning this, this study adopts Sewell's (1992) concept of the multiplicity of structures to understand how both cultural and structural elements of the class processes are interrelated. Furthermore, despite its theoretical and empirical relevance, there has been little research focusing on the class issues of parenting in the context of Hong Kong. Studies show that class-specific parenting practices and values are diverse by in-class fractions, race, and regions (Sherman, 2017; Underhill, 2018; Matsuoka, 2019; Hegna & Smette, 2016; Vincent & Maxwell, 2016; Devine, 2004). Notably characterized by the hyper-competitive and hybrid cultural educational context, and the deeply unequal society, the Hong Kong case can be an analytical leverage for the cross-cultural comparison of class-specific parenting practices. Therefore, this study aims to extend the existing literature by offering additional evidences for the class difference of parenting values and practices in the context of Hong Kong.

Objectives / Purpose of the study

The purpose of the present study is to help refine and further elaborate the complex mechanisms underlying how class-specific parenting practices sustain inequalities.

Specifically, in the context of Hong Kong, this study aims to (1) analyze the patterns of class-based difference in how parents interpret and make sense of their parenting experiences; (2) have a more nuanced understanding of the interdependence of class resources, culture, and parenting practices; and (3) explore whether there is a Chinese / Asian cultural dimension in class differences in parenting.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach to examining class difference in parenting practices and values in Hong Kong. At the current stage, semi-structured interviews with 15 parents were conducted in January and February 2019. Note that this study is a 1-year project that the fieldwork is still underway. More cases are expected to be included and analyzed in this study. Although the sample size is small, qualitative samples (or cases) are not selected out of their representativeness in a population (Creswell &

Miller, 2000). Rather, they are used for making logical inference about ‘the essential linkage between two or more characteristics in terms of some explanatory schema’ (Mitchell, 1983: 200). If the cases are appropriately chosen and compared with regard to theoretical and demographic dimensions, they can yield unique insights by revealing regularities between categories of cases that may escape large-N studies (Small, 2009).

The sampling criteria for the study are parents who are the local Chinese (in a broad and inclusive sense) residing in Hong Kong with at least one child of kindergarten age or primary school age at the time of face-to-face interview. Although we set out to interview mothers and fathers, it was thus far overwhelmingly mothers who came to participate in this study (13 mothers and 2 fathers). It is no surprise as childrearing is historically gender-bound as mothers remain the primary caregiver (or the one in the family who is most inclined towards childrearing issues) in most cases. Additionally, there can be substantial differences in parenting values and practices among mothers-working mothers, full-time mothers, opt-out mothers, single mothers and so on. In the process of participant recruitment, thus, this has been taken into account. Above all, however, feasibility for multiple comparisons among parental ‘sub-groups’ is a concern for this study. It must be acknowledged that a small sample (i.e., 15 participants only), recruited by means of snowball sampling (see the sampling procedures below), would have limited diversity and insufficient combinations of parental sub-groups. Thus, instead of using fine-grained categorization in case selection to show subtle differentiations between sub-groups, this study attempts to discover the patterns of parenting with a particular emphasis on class disparities.

As for class categorization, similar to the approach adopted by Lareau’s (2011) study, this study does not intend to deal with the methodological sophistication of class stratification but attempts to capture the underlying patterns of parenting across the two main contemporary class categories—a middle class and a lower class, each broadly defined by both parents’ educational levels and occupations (or occupational status) (p. 346). In fact, a similar approach of defining class categories simply using part of or a combination of educational and occupational attainments has been widely adopted (perhaps serving as the working definition) in the studies concerning parenting and social class (e.g., Lareau, 2011; Devine, 2004; Irwin, 2017; Reay, 1998). Of course, many cases are distinct (e.g., university-educated parents are often considered as the middle class) but others may be borderline, which require the researcher’s judgement (or say, the researcher’s deliberate choice), guided by specific contexts, conventions and other theoretical and empirical grounds. For cases where the dual-earner

parents are assigned to divergent class categories, a higher category (i.e., middle-class) is used (Lareau, 2011: 347).

Snowball sampling method was adopted to identify information-rich key respondents in respect to the class-related patterns of parents' perceptions and experiences of their role, their values and their expectations for their children's education. This method might also help develop respondents' trust with the researcher who was validated by someone they knew. At the outset, the researcher invited referrals from his personal network (this in-network selection should not be considered to be a 'bias' in a qualitative study that does not try to make samples/ cases representative. See Small (2009) for detailed explanations). Respondents were clearly informed about the purpose of the study, the researcher's contact information, the interview procedures, the confidentiality of respondents' information, and their freedom to withdraw at any time.

Table 1 summarizes the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants in this study.

Table 1 - Demographic Characteristics of Interviewed Parents

Variable	Frequency, %
<u>Gender</u>	
Female	13 (86.7)
Male	2 (13.3)
<u>Age</u>	
	Mean = 40.71 (S.D. = 4.51)
<u>Social class*</u>	
Middle class	10 (66.7)
Lower class	5 (33.3)
<u>Education</u>	
Below University	4 (26.7)
University and above	11 (73.3)
<u>Spouse's education</u>	
Below University	5 (33.3)
University and above	9 (60.0)
<u>Number of children</u>	
1	6 (40.0)
2	6 (40.0)
3	3 (20.0)
<i>N</i>	15

Note: The respondents were assigned to a middle-class or lower-class category based on detailed information about their and their spouses' educational credentials and occupational statuses.

Preliminary Findings

The preliminary findings of this on-going study point to the subtle differences of parental values and practices in relation to class positions. Regardless of class backgrounds, all the parent respondents emphasized the

intensive parenting to greater or lesser degree. Their values in parenting were rather ambivalent. On the one hand, they had high aspirations for their children's future educational attainment (at least completing a university education). As a result, both middle-class parents and parents from the lower class tended to use a similar set of intensive parenting strategies to foster their children's cognitive and noncognitive development. On the other hand, they also valued a fulfilling and happy life for their children. At times, these two types of values are conflicting with each other when being put into practice. Middle-class parents were more likely to see them as a matter of *choice* between a more intensive parenting and a more hands-off one. Conversely, due to the resources limitation, most lower-class parents were struggling with the academic demands of intensive parenting strategies. When they found that they failed to have the desired impact on their children's academic outcomes, they tended to interpret that as a 'fate' or as a result of placing a high value on child's happiness. For instance, one interviewed father from the lower class background said, 'I can't afford it', admitting that his family had to give up pushing his daughter towards the pathway of the so-called elite school education due to their limited resources. In other words, despite that they may be similar in their attempts to foster their children in an intensive parenting style, middle-class parents and lower-class parents from the lower class tended to have different ways to make sense of their parenting experiences and struggles.

Discussion

This study have sought to refine and further elaborate the explanatory framework emerged in the existing literature on the role of parents in sustaining class inequalities. The first important implication of this study derives from the main findings on how class-specific parenting practices in Hong Kong were manifested in a different, more insidious way than what Lareau's work (2003; 2011) suggests. As noted above, a number of sociologists argue that it is essentially not parenting cultures but family resources (i.e., structural factors) that critically make working class children being most likely to lag behind in the school or to have social behavior problems (Chin & Phillips 2004; Roksa & Potter 2011; Bennett et al., 2012; Dermott & Pomati 2016; Sullivan, Ketende & Joshi, 2013). However, as Freeman et al. (2019) suggests, Lareau's (2003) explanatory framework based on class-specific parenting values and practices entails structural elements, in a sense that these values and practices generated by the 'cultural logics' are essentially implicated in multiple structures within a society (Freeman et al., 2019; Sewell, 1992). Although the preliminary findings fall short of developing a sophisticated explanation (given its preliminary state), it clearly signposts some main dimensions of a

framework for reflecting on the debate between the ‘resources’ thesis and the ‘culture’ thesis in the existing literature.

Policy-wise, addressing such a debate is much needed. There has been an increasing emphasis on state-backed parenting support and training as a field of family policy in many advanced capitalist countries. For instance, from the 1970s, the British government’s policy and approaches to child-rearing parents became more likely to apply behaviourist tactics derived from new ‘neoliberal’ principles of managerial control (Hendrick 2016). An overwhelming focus on parenting as skills and strategies may end up reinforcing the ‘deficit model’ of parenting among the worse off, suggesting that they are responsible for low levels of social mobility.

Another major implication of this study is that it provides much needed empirical data on the case of Hong Kong, which extends to the discussion of cross-cultural complexity of class inequalities in comparative ways. Recent studies in class-specific parenting strategies point to regional variations, asserting that parents’ effects in relation to social class vary by different socio-cultural contexts (Underhill, 2018; Matsuoka, 2019; Hegna & Smette 2016; Devine 2004). Cultural variations of values and strategies for childrearing are found between American and British middle-class, professional parents (Devine 2004). However, Hegna and Smette’s study (2016) suggests that social class difference in the experiences of parental influences is not prominent among the Norwegian youth. Matsuoka’s (2018) study using nationally representative longitudinal data in Japan shows that the focus of the middle-class practice of concerted cultivation tends to change across children’s educational stages given the nation’s standardized education system. To some extent, Hong Kong context is comparable to Japan’s in terms of the high stakes testing system.

In addition, the Hong Kong case has been notably characterized by the highly competitive schooling system, the unique blend of Eastern and Western cultural environment, as well as the deeply unequal society. Studies show strong evidences for how parents, directly or indirectly, shape class differentials in Hong Kong’s education (Wong, 2017; Kwan & Wong, 2016; Chen & Wong, 2014). One notable finding of this study suggests that, given the dominant ideology of placing high value on education that has historically reigned in most Chinese societies, the local parents generally share the cultural understanding of intensive parenting for child’s academic achievement but have different ways pertaining to class positions in making sense of their parenting practices. The findings of the present study can be incorporated in the larger body of work on class analysis, especially in Asia Pacific, for cross-cultural comparison.

References

- Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction : a social critique of the judgement of taste*. (Translated by Richard Nice). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Calarco, J. M. 2014. The Inconsistent Curriculum: Cultural Tool-Kits and Student Interpretations of Ambiguous Expectations. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 76: 186-209.
- Carolan, B.V. 2016. Unequal academic achievement in high school: the mediating roles of concerted cultivation and close friends. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 37(7): 1034-1055.
- Chen, W., Wong, Y. 2015. Chinese mindset: theories of intelligence, goal orientation, and academic achievement in Hong Kong Students. *Educational Psychology: An International Journal of Experimental Educational Psychology* 35(6):714-725.
- Chin, T., Phillips, M. 2004. Social reproduction and child-rearing practices: Social class, children's agency, and the summer activity gap. *Sociology of education* 77(3): 185-210.
- Creswell, J.W., Miller, D.L. 2000. Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory into practice* 39(3): 124-130.
- Dermott, E., Pomati, M. 2016. 'Good' Parenting Practices: How Important are Poverty, Education and Time Pressure. *Sociology*. 50(1): 125-142.
- Devine, F. 2004. *Class practices: How parents help their children get good jobs*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hamilton, L.T. 2016. *Parenting to a Degree: How Family Matters for College Women's Success*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hendrick, H. 2016. *Narcissistic Parenting in an Insecure World: A History of Parenting Culture 1920s to the Present*. Chicago: Policy Press.
- Hegna, K., Smette, I. 2017. Parental influence in educational decisions: young people's perspectives. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 38(8): 1111-1124.
- Lee, T.T.L., Chiu, S.W.K. 2016. Curriculum reform and the social class achievement gap. *Social Transformations in Chinese Societies* 12(2): 148-165.
- Irwin, S. 2017. Parenting teenagers as they grow up: Values, practices and young people's pathways beyond school in England. *The Sociological Review* 66(1): 241-256.
- Irwin, S., Elley, S. 2013. Parents' hopes and expectations for their children's future occupations. *The Sociological Review* 61(1): 111-130.
- Jack, A.A. 2016. (No) Harm in Asking Class, Acquired Cultural Capital, and Academic Engagement at an Elite University. *Sociology of Education* 89: 1-19.

- Johnston, B., 2007. Class/Culture/Action: Representation, Identity, and Agency in Educational Analysis. In: J. A. Van Galen and G. W. Noblit (Eds.), *Late to Class: Social Class and Schooling in the New Economy*, Albany, State University of New York Press, pp, 29-54.
- Lareau, A. 2003. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lareau, A. 2011. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life. 2nd ed.* Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lareau, A., Weinger, E.B. 2003. Cultural capital in educational research: A critical assessment. *Theory and society* 32: 567-606.
- Matsuoka, R. 2019. Concerted Cultivation Developed in a Standardized Education System. *Social Science Research* 77: 161-178.
- Mitchell, J.C. 1983. Case and Situation Analysis. *The Sociological Review* 31(2): 187–211.
- Reay, D. 1998. *Class work: Mothers' involvement in their children's primary schooling*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Kwan, P., Wong, Y. 2016. Parental involvement in schools and class inequality in education: Some recent findings from Hong Kong. *International Journal of Learning and Pedagogies, Special Issue: Parental Involvement* 11(2):91-102.
- Roksa, J., D. Potter. 2011. Parenting and Academic Achievement: Intergenerational Transmission of Educational Advantage. *Sociology of Education* 84(4): 299-321.
- Savage, M., Devine, F., Cunningham, N., Taylor, M., Li, Y., Hjellbrekke, J., Le Roux, B., Friedman, S., Miles, A. 2013. A new model of social class? Findings from the BBC's Great British Class Survey experiment. *Sociology* 47(2): 219-250.
- Sewell, W.H. 1992. A theory of structure: Duality, agency, and transformation. *American Journal of Sociology* 98(1): 1–29.
- Sherman, R. 2017. Conflicted cultivation: Parenting, privilege, and moral worth in wealthy New York families. *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 5: 1-13.
- Small, M.L. 2009. 'How many cases do I need?' On science and the logic of case selection in field-based research. *Ethnography* 10(1): 5-38.
- Sullivan, A., Ketende, S., Joshi, H. 2013. Social class and inequalities in early cognitive scores. *Sociology* 47(6): 1187-1206.
- Tsang, W.K. 1997. From exclusionary elitism to segregated elitism: the latent structure of the development of 9-year Compulsory Education in Hong Kong. Hong Kong Institute of Educational Research, The Chinese University of Hong Kong (In Chinese).

- Underhill, M.R. 2018. White parents and exposure to diversity parenting practices. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*. Advanced online publication.
- Vincent, C., Maxwell, C. 2016. Parenting priorities and pressures: Furthering understanding of 'concerted cultivation'. *Discourse: Studies in the cultural politics of education* 37(2): 269-281.
- Wong, Y. 2017, Class Differentials in getting Parental Assistance for seeking a Second Chance of getting into University: An illustration of Community College Students in Hong Kong. *Higher Education* 74:163-178.
- Wong, Y., Koo Anita, 2016. 'Is Hong Kong no longer a land of opportunities after the 1997 handover? : A comparison of patterns of social mobility between 1989 and 2007' *Asian Journal of Social Science* 44(4-5):516-545.
- Wu, X.G. 2007, Family Resources and Educational Stratification: The Case of Hong Kong, 1981-2001. *Social Transformations in Chinese Societies Volume 3*: 173-201.