

How Does Class Impact Children?

Social class refers to the social and economic opportunities that dictate the activities, behaviors, networks, and knowledge of an individual. Within social science research, social class has been defined probabilistically according to a number of factors such as educational attainment, income, and occupation (521). For example, measuring someone's education, income, and occupation simultaneously may indicate their social class, whether low, middle, or upper. More recently, these constructs have been criticized for being inaccurate measures of a person's access to social and economic opportunities (519). Current variables have been said to obscure the various ways in which people gain access to social institutions and mobility. In response, researchers have started to consider the role of capital (social, cultural, human, and psychological), in the equation of social class, drawing attention to an individual's access to education, knowledge, family, labor markets, networks, and associations.

As discussed, long-standing constructs of social class have done a less than optimal job at addressing its various dimensions, but new and nuanced understandings of social class are beginning look at other variables. In fact, "place" is an emerging variable for social class that may account for differences in class strata (528-29). Researchers have increasingly found that an individual's location exposes them to conditions that define their skills and mobility later in life, and which may be difficult to overcome (525). For example, experiences outside the home can offset or reinforce socialization in the family. Studies have shown that childcare settings, peer interactions, and institutions can have an effect children's cognitive and emotional skills (528). Consequently, families with greater resources and knowledge are able to send their children to settings with better peers and facilities whereas families who cannot afford such costs send their

children to settings with lower quality resources (528). Evidently, “place” exposes individuals to certain circumstances that have lasting impacts on the skills and life trajectory of individuals.

Another variable of social class is what social scientists have referred to as social capital, the networks, associations, and knowledge from a particular social milieu. Parents’ resources best capture the notion of social capital as those with more education are largely in tune with the ins and outs of the education, particularly school and college, than their counterparts (527-28; 533). Privileged parents also understand that building a portfolio of experience is crucial to mobility. To further illustrate, sponsors (or family members that promote children’s advancement in the workplace) use their contacts and connections to catapult children into training, service, and work opportunities. In sum, social capital relates to the resources available in a society that enable respective processes and structures to take place, which is integral to social class.

Overall, social class has insidious effects on children development (525-26). According to developmental research, mothers’ prenatal experiences as well as their neonatal health care differ significantly across classes. This allows some children to have normal experiences before birth while others to lack in this regard, tipping the scale of endowment. There is also a critical period for emotional development in which children need to develop attachments with stable emotional figures, but it is recognized that some children get less stimulation or fewer opportunities to bond. Even within the home, children exhibit variations in words, expressions, and interaction styles as a result of class differences in child-rearing practices, advanced training outside the home, social capital, and socialization, which later impact reading skills and school success. Finally, low-income families do not have the same support or concerns about safety as high-income families (530-31). Because low-income families do not have equivalent resources, they

are more likely to experience psychological stressors and social troubles which they cannot prevent or remedy in the short-term. Given the influence of social class, complications abound for children with less resources and opportunities.

Yet, the question remains: How can we better serve children from low-income households? To preface this response, I bring attention to the fact that children from low-income homes have to work twice as hard as those from high-income households only to receive a basic education. Viable pathways for upward mobility (going from the bottom of the quartile to the top) include possessing extraordinary talents, which very few have, and if they are not talented, they risk staying in the low-income trap (535). Now, I turn to possible ways to help these children. From an individual standpoint, socialization may increase the chances of positive children development. For example, revisions to the education system may help balance the differences in skills and educational attainment that vary among class strata, and lessen inequalities throughout the developmental course. By teaching students the skills and knowledge that are highly valued in the social world, mobility can be more achievable.

Reference

Furstenberg, Frank. "Diverging Development: The Not-So-Invisible Hand of Social Class in the United States." *Families as They Really Are 2*: 518-537.