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NIE18032 - Parenting Behavior amongst Mothers of Preschoolers

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Abstract - The purpose of this paper is to investigate the impact of subjective childhood socioeconomic status on maternal parenting sensitivity; specifically, in relation to maternal intrusive behaviours as observed during tasks requiring varying degrees of conformity. The main hypothesis for this paper is that the relationship between childhood socioeconomic status and intrusiveness will largely vary by the context of the task presented to the mother and child.

This paper will consist of three major parts: the first will review research linking socioeconomic status to parenting sensitivity. Next, it will examine literature on the life course perspective relative to socioeconomic status, in order to understand the intersubjective meanings that mothers across socioeconomic status have towards rules and other facets of conformity. Finally, it will describe a means of investigating this work in an ongoing study conducted within the Centre for Research in Child Development and will analyse and discuss relevant preliminary data.

Results from this study provide an avenue for further discourse into understanding how subjective socioeconomic status affects the way in which mothers understand and appreciate different contexts thereby resulting in differing parental behaviours across socioeconomic lines.

Keywords – child development, parental behaviours, socioeconomic status, life course perspective

LITERATURE REVIEW

Socioeconomic status (SES) has long been a point of discourse in its influence on parental sensitivity. Hoff, Laursen and Tardif (2002) traces the epistemology of SES against parenting from the early 1900s until today. They posit that early research had two primary goals; first, to understand how parental values and behaviours are influenced by social status and second, to understand how this can improve the circumstances of children's lives. This did not come without its inherent problems, however. Traditional SES-related research on parenting obscured many external influences that might prove as confounds toward parental behaviours. Moreover, research on SES and its influence on parenting insinuated that there were indeed those that

were of the lower working class and those that belonged to the elite. This opposed the rhetoric of many governments of that time that everyone was 'middle-class'.

However, in contemporary developmental research, scholars have started to recognise the many other external nuances outside of a person's social status that may influence parental behaviours. Scholars have also started to focus on the social trajectories of not just children but also of parents based on SES-focused parenting. This combined allowed the rejuvenation of developmental research and parental behaviours vis-à-vis SES.

Roubinov and Boyce (2017) examines the direct relationship between parenting behaviors and SES. They posit that existing developmental research focuses too deeply into "parenting as a pathway through which socioeconomic status influences child development" (Roubinov & Boyce 2017:1) instead of focusing directly on parenting and SES and their exact dyadic relationship. Although it would have been interesting to see the authors delve into the exact relationship between parenting and SES, they instead chose to dissect existing research and studies in developmental literature instead. Using existing parental models and pathways, they aimed to explain how the socioeconomic conditions within which a family lives may powerfully influence parenting through its effects on parental mental health and via differential access to resources. Parents' child-rearing knowledge and cultural values may also vary along a socioeconomic gradient, with downstream effects on parenting. They also contend that SES is too multi-faceted to ever isolate into one single measure. Thus, the large volume of confounds makes existing research on development and parenting left wanting. This paper will acknowledge that the confounds in computing and defining SES is still a grey area in contemporary research. However, this paper prioritises not the exact confounds of SES but rather the mothers' understanding and placement of their own socioeconomic standing within the larger society as a whole.

THROUGH THE SOCIOLOGICAL LENS

The sociological lens helps in explaining why and whether there would be, external influences on parenting styles amongst mothers. This paper will primarily engage with literature on the life course perspective.

Life Course Perspective

The life course perspective was developed in the mid-1960s to analyse the lives of individuals across cultural and social contexts or by the influence of power structures. The life course perspective focuses on continuity and change in well-being over the life course and suggests the ways in which parenting and the *linked lives* of parents and children affect the life trajectories of these individuals over time (Milkie, Bierman, & Schieman, 2008). The life course perspective also focuses on inequality by emphasizing that individuals vary in their exposure to stressors and resources throughout life. Differential exposure to environmental risks and resources around parenthood can produce increasing disadvantage for the well-being of some and increasing advantage for others (Kendig, Dykstra, van Gaalen, & Melkas, 2007). This approach recognizes human agency in life course experiences.

This paper will primarily focus on the constructionist approach of the life course perspective, foregrounding time, sequence and life stages of individuals to better understand the reasons for the differing maternal sensitivities across SES lines (Gubrium and Holstein, 2000). This is largely in part to better explain how the experiences of mothers in different life stages would eventually shape the behaviours in adulthood and ultimately, as parents themselves.

The Life Stages

While developmental scholars have different definitions for how many life stages an individual goes through, we choose to focus on three life stages that would be pertinent to the topic at hand. These three life stages are childhood, adolescence and adulthood (focused more specifically on parenthood). These three life stages, this paper argues, are key in understand the different degrees of maternal behaviours and sensitivities across SES lines. This paper does want to point out that the lived experiences of individuals are unique, but there are some generalisable outcomes amongst those of similar SES.

Childhood

The analysis of this life stage is influenced heavily from the works of Lareau (2011) and Teo (2018). The outcomes of children at this stage are largely dependent on the resources available, to and provided for, by their parents. Inevitably, those that belong to the higher

social classes will be able to access more of these resources while those belonging to working class families do not.

Lareau (2011) mentions how social economic class was a significant determiner in how children cultivate skills they will use later in life. These skills were brought on by the parenting styles that parents of differing SES employ. For middle-class families, *Concerted Cultivation*, was the favoured parenting style. Concerted cultivation involves the active participation of both parents and children; to promote active discussion and negotiation in parent-child interactions. On the other hand, working-class families much preferred *Accomplishment of Natural Growth*, a parenting style that involves a more top-down approach; of directives from the parent to child instead of an equal participation of communication between the two parties. They also promote following the roles and to trust those that are in positions of authority. Lareau (2011) posits that this style of parenting promotes skills necessary for lower-end, working-class jobs where adhering to authority is necessary. It also teaches the children to respect and take the advice of people in authority, and allows the children to become independent at a younger age.

Teo (2018) primarily researched families living in public rental housing in Singapore. Her research explored the differing circumstances between herself, an accomplished scholar in her field and a fellow mother, with other mothers who are living with heavy assistance through State-run institutions. She realised that while the circumstances between herself and these mothers were vastly different, the underlying adage was the same: to want the very best for their child. However, there is a large dichotomy in the access to resources these children have. Many children from lower-class families do not possess the necessary English and Mathematic skills required of them by the age of seven (the time where Singaporean children enter their first formal institution of education, primary school). This then creates a snowball effect of lagging behind academically, along with the self-esteem problems that come with the assumption that these children are lazy and unmotivated since the circumstances of poverty are often obscured from the public eye.

The messages that both Lareau (2011) and Teo (2018) bring forward are clear: children from different SES have generally different experiences and thus, different outcomes in life. However, this paper takes a different stance to Lareau (2011). We argue that the possibility of Singapore being more Asian-centric and being less influenced by the Western world, we tend to take a more pragmatic approach to the parenting styles of mothers.

This paper posits that while the respect for authority figures is still present and more pervasive among those in working-class families, they would also take a more traditional approach to success. This is through not just

respecting authority, but following the rules to the T. This ensures that while the route to educational stress is more rigid, their children will be ready to enter better high schools once they take their Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). This is in contrast to the observations of Lareau; that instead of preparing their children for excelling in working-class jobs, parents from working-class families are preparing them instead for success in high school and tertiary institutions. This paper however acknowledges those at the extremely low end of the income spectrum, this demographic may then follow the views of Lareau (2011) instead of what this paper might argue. However, for the sake of argument, we will choose to leave out this specific group of families. However, further research into this may be a possible avenue of discourse for sociologists interested in the unequal lives within the Singapore society or other first-world societies.

Adolescence

The adolescence life stage involves teenagers from the ages generally from 13-18 (Gubrium and Holstein, 2000). In Singapore, majority of adolescents are either in secondary school (the equivalent of high school in the United States), in junior college, polytechnic or in some other sort of formal educational setting. This life stage is influenced from the observations of Khan (2012) who was studying behaviours of students in an elite high school in the United States which he himself was an alumnus of as well.

What was interesting was that students that belonged to the upper echelons of society had no pressure to succeed. Instead, students assumed that excelling in their college preparatory exams was a given right instead of an endeavour they had to work towards. The rules of the game of life worked differently for them. On top of the regular academic classes that these students had to take, they were required to also attend etiquette courses, learning behaviours that befit their standing in society. Staff, including cleaners, knew the names of each and every student and addressed them with respect. However, this relationship was non-reciprocal; students were not required to learn the names of the staff of St. Paul, which Khan was ashamed of admitting as well.

Although the work of Khan takes a rather extreme outlook on the upper rungs of society and may not necessarily reflect the views of Singaporean schools, we do see a dichotomy in the pedagogy of public schools and private schools in Singapore as well. While elite schools in Singapore focused on training up the habitus of these students to excel not just as students, but as contributors to society in its highest form, be it in politics or otherwise (Koh and Kenway, 2012).

Adulthood

Bourdieu (2017)'s theory on habitus is important to understand the pervasiveness of the influence of the inequalities in childhood and adolescence life stages of an individual. The ability to carry oneself through life in adulthood is only as strong as the cultures inculcated in the individual's childhood and adolescence. Bourdieu (2017)'s belief was that in our formative years, the habits, lifestyles and culture we both inhibit and exhibit are of direct consequence from our circumstances. Parents who are affluent will likely pass on values that society might deem useful and practical. On the other hand, lower-class families may pass on values and traits that may not necessarily be practical and of dollar value, but rather, to ensure that their progeny remains outside of the justice system and are aware of how sticky negative labels can be. Teo (2018) echoes this, she writes how she observes the values of honesty, sincerity, and courtesy being more pronounced in lower SES children and adults alike while values such as grit and determination were more pronounced amongst higher SES children.

As it stands, there is no sociological literature that draws the direct impact of SES in earlier life stages on parenting styles of mothers. However, there is substantial literature of the impacts of SES on each specific life stage, as discussed in the earlier contents of this paper.

The life course perspective along with the sociological imagination was useful in drawing initial assumptions about mother-child interactions for this paper. Due to the different lived experiences of these mother along SES lines, there has to be some differences in maternal sensitivity. What is important to note is that this paper does not take away from the assumptions that Lareau (2011) and Teo (2018) made: that mothers want only the best for their children. Knowing what is best however, is highly dependent on past experiences of dealing with people of authority and the values that they have been inculcated by their own parents and society at large as well.

Initial Hypotheses

The first hypothesis that this paper aimed to test how maternal sensitivity (as determined by the Erickson scale) would be different if there was a difference in the task required of the mother and child to complete. This difference was measured as levels of intrusiveness, actions by the mother upon the child during the task required of them. One task consisted of a required rule and goal while the other was making the mother and child simply interact with the items provided. This introduction of a 'rule', this paper posits, would result in a difference in behaviours for mothers, regardless of their SES. We believed that due to the difference in the nature of the tasks, there will be thus a difference in the

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