

Social Class Differences in Parenting? Revisiting Classed Childrearing through a Video-Ethnography of Mealtime

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Abstract: Sociological research has long established social class differences in childrearing strategies. However, recent studies suggest more heterogeneity by social class in parenting practices than previously recognized. In this article, we revisit families' classed socialization processes by drawing from the New Jersey Families Study, a two-week, in-home video study of 21 families with young children, to examine how working-class and middle-class families interact with their children during mealtimes. Contrary to expectations, we found that social class did not neatly correspond to parenting styles, with half of families blending middle-class and working-class styles. This is one of the first sociological studies to closely observe the socialization of young children across different social classes. It is also one of few studies in sociology to use video-ethnographic data. Finally, this study challenges long-standing assumptions about class-based socialization, suggesting that in contemporary families, social class boundaries are much blurrier than previously believed when it comes to childrearing.

Keywords: social class; parenting; childrearing; video; socialization; family

Reproducibility Package: Data are not publicly available due to informed consent agreements. For researchers interested in using the New Jersey Families Study data, please contact Joanne Golann for more information.

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FAMILIES transfer many resources to their children, some visible and some less visible. Besides providing children with material resources, social connections, and genetic endowments, parents also transmit attitudes, skills, and behaviors that differentially equip children to succeed in school and the workplace. Sociologists have argued that the transmission of class-based cultural skills—though largely invisible—plays an important role in social reproduction (Bourdieu 1974; Lamont and Lareau 1988; Lareau 2003).

For half a century, sociologists have identified differences in socialization processes between working-class and middle-class families. Working-class families have been found to place greater value on conformity, deference to authority, and obedience to rules, while middle-class families emphasize self-direction, creativity, and individuality (Anyon, 1980; Bourdieu, 1984; Bernstein, 1971; Calarco, 2014; Harvey, 2023; Kohn, 1969; Lareau, 2003). However, more recent studies suggest that social class differences in parenting may be becoming less stark (Ishizuka 2018; Prickett and Augustine 2021) and that there may be more blurriness in parenting styles than sociologists once thought (Weininger and Lareau 2009). Scholarship on cross-class marriages, social mobility, and intersections of class and other social characteristics reveal much more nuance in outcomes associated with social class,

such as aspirations, sense of purpose, or skills that are necessary for life (Dow 2019; Hamilton 2016; Roksa and Potter 2011; Streib 2015). Given these observations, a revisit of how class matters in parents' socialization of children is in order.

In this study, we take up the recent call for sociologists to redirect their attention to socialization (Guhin, Calarco, and Miller-Idriss 2021) by exploring classed socialization processes within families with young children. Our data come from the New Jersey Families Study (NJFS), an innovative video study that recorded 21 families, each with a child between the ages of 2 and 5, in their homes over a two-week period. Given the vast amount of video data collected, we center our attention on food interactions as integral parts of families' everyday routines and a strategic site to observe how families accomplish basic tasks. We ask: How do working-class and middle-class families interact with and socialize their young children during mealtimes?

The significance of this study is multifold. First, this is one of the first sociological studies to closely observe the socialization of young children across different social classes. Bourdieu (1990) argued that class-based cultural skills are formed in early childhood and remain durable over time, yet we know surprisingly little about how families shape their young children's attitudes, behaviors, and early expectations. Second, this is one of the few studies in sociology to use video-ethnographic data (Golann, Mirakhur, and Espenshade 2019). With rapid advances in video technology, machine learning, and big data, the time is ripe to explore what video can offer the field. Finally, this study reveals significant heterogeneity in parenting practice within social classes, directing future researchers to consider forms and sources of this variation within contemporary households. Findings from this study do not completely negate existing theory about class-based socialization and childrearing (Bernstein 1971; Calarco 2014; Kohn 1969; Lareau 2003). However, because we find considerable within-class variation in how parents relate to and establish authority with their children, it suggests that "ideal" childrearing norms may be both diffusing from middle to lower classes and, in this contemporary moment, shifting among middle-class families.

Class-Based Parenting Styles

Despite widespread consensus that social class shapes cultural values, habits, and practices, it is not easy to delineate exactly what constitutes working-class and middle-class cultures. In reviewing classic and contemporary studies of social class differences in parenting, we identified four common dimensions of class culture: *social station* (Harvey 2023), *relationship to authority* (Calarco 2011, 2014, 2018; Lareau, 2003), *organization of daily life* (Lareau 2002, 2003; Streib 2015), and *language use* (Lareau 2002, 2003).

As defined by Harvey (2023), *social station* refers to "what children are taught about their position and direction in the world" (P. 493). Prior studies have observed that parents and teachers treat middle-class children as special and unique, seeking out their opinions and catering to their individual preferences and desires (Calarco 2018; Harvey 2023; Lareau 2003). Middle-class children thus develop a sense of distinctiveness and autonomy, seeing themselves as individuals who

possess the ability to make choices and shape their futures. By contrast, parents and teachers treat working-class children as members of a group who ought not differentiate themselves. These adults emphasize obedience to rules and conformity to external standards, anticipating the kinds of behaviors expected in working-class jobs (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Kohn 1969). For the working class, stability is prized and self-actualization is risky (Williams 2012). As Williams (2012) argues, “Whereas self-development of individual thoughts and talents holds the economic key for upper-middle-class kids, a similar focus among working-class kids would be counterproductive” (P. 42).

Relationship to authority pertains to how children interact with adults and other institutional figures like teachers and coaches. Middle-class families emphasize more egalitarian and person-centered relationships, where power is shared between adults and children, instead of traditional hierarchical, position-centered relationships found in working-class families where clear boundaries are set between adults and children (Bernstein 1971; Lareau 2003). Middle-class parents encourage their children to show entitlement and be assertive toward institutional authorities, whereas working-class parents emphasize self-reliance¹ and deference (Calarco 2018; Golann 2021; Lareau 2003). For example, Calarco (2014) shows how middle-class parents teach their children to embrace a “by any means” approach to solving problems, encouraging their children to demand help from their teachers. By contrast, working-class parents teach their children “no excuses problem-solving,” to rely on their own resources and avoid and appease teachers. In a historical moment where middle-class institutions privilege self-confident, assertive, and expressive individuals who advocate for their needs (De Keere and Spruyt 2019), children with a sense of entitlement are able to negotiate advantages for themselves, from extra help in the classroom (Calarco 2011, 2018; Golann 2021; Streib 2011) to a paper extension in college (Jack 2019) to a coveted job opportunity (Rivera 2016). The restraint learned by working-class children can serve them in interactions with institutional agents from whom they need to obtain services and show deference (Clair 2020; Lareau 2003).

Organization of daily life refers to how children’s time and tasks are structured in everyday life. Lareau (2003) argues that middle-class parents pursue a strategy of concerted cultivation, actively fostering their children’s talents and skills by enrolling them in numerous organized activities. Working-class parents, by contrast, use a strategy of natural growth, providing for their children’s basic needs but largely leaving children to their self-directed activity.² Streib (2015) terms these different approaches to family life as “managerial” versus “laissez faire,” reflecting classed assumptions about whether and how desired family outcomes happen. For all aspects of family life—money, paid work, housework, parenting, leisure, and even emotions—middle class adults, who assume intervention is necessary to achieve their ideals, are more likely to plan, organize, or manage family life, whereas working-class adults, who are more likely to enjoy the moment and believe things will work out on their own, take a more relaxed and less intentional or directed approach (Streib 2015). The middle-class strategy is an expensive one, one that requires time, effort, and money, a level of involvement that is not practical for typical working-class families even if desired (Chin and Phillips 2004; Lareau 2003;

Nelson 2010). Moreover, the cost of “intensive parenting” often falls on mothers who take on the bulk of managing their children’s busy schedules (Hamilton 2016; Hays 1996). Despite the sacrifices, middle-class families feel pressured to engage in intensive parenting to help their children access and navigate the most selective colleges so their children can get ahead in an ever more competitive labor market (Golann 2021; Hays 1996; Lareau 2003)—or, if female, marry well (Hamilton 2016).

Finally, *language use* encompasses how and when children speak and what they judge as appropriate communication. Early sociologists like Bernstein (1971) observed social class differences in the syntax and grammatical structures of speech, whereas contemporary sociologists have focused on the types of exchanges that occur between adults and children (Lareau 2003). Lareau (2003), for example, found that middle-class parents engaged in frequent negotiations with their children and accepted children’s push back. They also reasoned with children and elicited children’s opinions and preferences. By contrast, working-class parents used more directives with their children and tended not to draw them out extensively in conversation. In a preschool setting, Streib (2011) found that middle-class children spoke more, interrupted more, and dominated conversation, whereas working-class children tended to raise their hands and listen. Kozlowski (2020, 2021) observed similar patterns among first graders: middle-class students were more likely to decode academic tasks and demonstrate desired academic information, whereas working-class students, less clear on how to decode academic tasks, were more likely to demonstrate knowledge of rules and procedure instead. Thus, middle-class children learn a more strategic form of communication to navigate reward structures and get others to meet their needs while working-class children are taught to be compliant.

In sum, sociologists have long identified social class differences in how children are socialized to view themselves, interact with authority, use their time, and communicate. These cultural differences have been observed in both classic and contemporary studies, across family and school contexts. However, a growing number of studies has begun to challenge this dichotomy, suggesting that there may be more blurriness in parenting practices than sociologists once thought.

Intersections across a diversity of status and family composition characteristics may blur dichotomous, classed-based approaches to child socialization. For instance, Hamilton (2016) finds that one common approach for parents of college women is to intervene on their children’s behalf only in emergencies. This approach, adopted by parents across classes, straddles the line between higher-class “helicopter” parents who excessively curate their children’s skills and lower-class “bystander” parents with limited influence (Hamilton 2016). It is plausible that blurred parenting approaches occur earlier in families, long before children go to college. Research on cross-class partners and upwardly/downwardly mobile parents illustrates a complex myriad of strategies and approaches to aspirations, time and resource management, and problem-solving (Roksa and Potter 2011; Streib 2015), which likely also has implications for rearing young children. When considering intersections of class and race, Black parents—even those who are middle class—discourage their children from engaging with law enforcement in entitled ways so they are more prepared for and better able to navigate racialized spaces

and encounters (Allen 2016; Dow 2019). Among Mexican American working-class and middle-class families, Rangel and Shoji (2021) found much more similarity than difference in parenting practices, in part, due to shared cultural backgrounds and contexts.

Even Lareau's (2003) own findings may have been fuzzier than sociology has institutionalized. Scholars have critiqued Lareau's work for not attending to ways in which working-class families customize and advance their children's learning experiences (Chin and Phillips 2004; Cuevas 2019; Stuber 2005), and Lareau herself has acknowledged that the social class distinctions she identified between middle-class families' emphasis on self-direction and working-class families' emphasis on conformity may not be so clear-cut (Weininger and Lareau 2009).

Finally, shifts over time may also blur once distinct social class parenting strategies. For example, by 2017, higher-SES families spent less time on intensive parenting practices themselves, instead outsourcing intensive parenting to high-quality childcare facilities, expert extracurricular coaches or teachers, and extended family (Prickett and Augustine 2021). Meanwhile, lower-SES families have increased their time on active childcare, because "standard" intensive parenting norms have diffused through cultural norms and public programs (Ishizuka 2018; Prickett and Augustine 2021). Although research on changes to parenting has focused on time invested, little is known about qualitative changes to classed parenting in recent decades, which is particularly salient as growing income and work inequality continues to further strain the average American family (Kalleberg 2011). This study thus provides an updated look at social class differences in parenting in a contemporary set of families. Although much of the research on family socialization focuses on older children (Lareau 2003; Calarco 2018; Dow 2019), we concentrate on children before they enter kindergarten. Studying children at a young age can more clearly show how individuals come to embody different ways of perceiving, evaluating, and acting in the world, or what Bourdieu (1990) calls *habitus*. Young children are still actively learning the unspoken rules of how to interact with authority, when to seek help or be self-reliant, and what provokes sanction or praise, making the socialization process more visible. To study social class differences (or similarities) in children's early socialization, we make use of an exceptional set of video data on families' home lives which we discuss subsequently.

Video-Ethnographic Approach

We take a video-ethnographic approach (Golann et al. 2019; Shrum and Scott 2017) where the goal is to "analyze conduct and interaction in 'naturally occurring' day-to-day settings" (Heath, Hindmarsh, and Luff 2010, p. 5). Few studies have video-recorded the everyday lives of families at home. Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik (2013), who examined how dual-earner families managed family and home life, used handheld video cameras to record 32 middle-class families with children aged 8–10 in Los Angeles in and around their homes in the early 2000s. They did not, however, focus on young children nor were they able to observe social class distinctions given their sample. Video data offer several advantages over traditional observational studies to the study of family life. Video captures microinteractions that may be

outside the scope of observation in real time, including facial expressions, gestures, detailed conversation, and interactional sequences (Barron 2009; Nassauer and Legewie 2018). Video also allows a window into everyday interactions in the home that may be outside the purview of the researcher. As data, video recordings provide a record that can be revisited and analyzed by multiple researchers (Derry et al. 2010) in contrast to traditional ethnographic data which can be difficult or impossible to share. As ethnographers have been challenged to make their analyses more transparent (Lubet 2017; Murphy, Jerolmack, and Smith 2021), video data can address some concerns over validity.

Although video has some advantages over traditional observational approaches, it also has its limitations. First, video produces a wealth of data to analyze, which requires additional time and resources. Additionally, reactivity and observer bias may still threaten the integrity of video studies (Gregory 2020), and visual anthropologists have extensively considered issues of visual representation, reflexivity, and the participants' perspective in video research (see Holliday 2000; Pink 2001). Unlike ethnographers who immerse themselves in a setting over a sustained period of time, video researchers can be distant from the data collection process and not benefit from relationships developed with participants and access to contextual meanings. What may be most interesting to researchers also may not be captured in the video frame. Though we encountered several of these challenges, we found that video data allowed us to study parent-child interactions in finer grained detail than we could with traditional ethnographic methods.

Methods

Our data come from the NJFS, an in-home video study that explores how families support their children's early learning. Twenty-one families each with a child aged 2–5 were recorded continuously in their homes for two weeks, resulting in 11,470 hours of video data. At the time of data collection, this was the first time anyone had attempted an in-home video study of this breadth, intensity, and duration.³ We briefly describe the study design here (for more information, see Golann et al. 2019), and then discuss in detail our data analysis process.

Data collection and sampling

We recruited families through daycare centers, preschools, libraries, parent groups, and other organizations in New Jersey that serve families with young children. We also used social media and online forums to promote the study. To select families, we first screened for interest, then conducted a phone interview, and finally, conducted a home visit. Respondents who were identified as potential participants based on the prescreening survey (e.g., had a child between ages 2–4, lived with child at least 50 percent of the time) were then interviewed by phone, where we gauged further interest and gleaned more background information. A home visit followed the phone interview. Families who met our basic criteria and completed all recruitment stages were selected primarily based on whether they added variation to our sample (e.g., by family structure, socioeconomic status,

race/ethnicity, child care arrangement, number of siblings, and gender of child). The 21 families in the study are approximately split between working-class and middle-class/professional families. Our sample includes six White families, seven Black families, one Asian family, and seven mixed-race families.

For the two-week home observation, two cameras were placed in up to four rooms in families' homes where most interactions occurred (parents' bedrooms and bathrooms were excluded for privacy). Cameras with motion sensors were activated simultaneously and continuously throughout the day and evening. We took a number of measures to ensure families' confidentiality and privacy, including giving families the opportunity to hold up a "stop sign" which would indicate to researchers to delete the next 10 minutes of recording. We also interviewed families before and after the video observation period about family demographics, family health, neighborhood, parenting values, parenting behaviors, and a debrief of their experience. Data collection occurred between 2017 and 2019.

Families were compensated \$500 for the videotaping, \$25 and a children's book for the home visit, and \$10 for the phone interview.⁴ Although our sample certainly is unique in that all our families agreed to participate in a two-week video study of their home, some families participated because of the monetary inducement while others were interested in the research.

Data reduction

Given the vast amount of video data and time intensity of reviewing the data, we followed several data reduction strategies. First, from the 21 families in the study, we decided to focus on 12 families, six working-class and six middle-class/professional families, as Lareau (2003) did.

We follow Lareau (2003) in defining middle-class families as those where "at least one parent is employed in a position that either entails substantial managerial authority or that centrally draws upon highly complex, educationally certified (i.e., college-level) skills," and working-class families as those where "neither parent is employed in a middle-class position and at least one parent is employed in a position with little or no managerial authority and that does not draw on highly complex, educationally certified skills" (P. 279). We characterized families' social class status based on information on parents' education, occupations, and work responsibilities gathered in our interest survey and interviews. Our middle-class families were predominantly from the professional class (Cucchiara 2013), with occupations such as accountant, research scientist, and software engineer, whereas our working-class families had occupations such as retail manager, gas attendant, and health care assistant. To select particular families within each social class category, we tried to maximize variation across parental race/ethnicity, gender of the child, and family structure. A maximum variation sampling strategy is useful for theory development and refinement because it allows the researcher to identify themes and patterns that cut across cases (Patton 1987).

A second data reduction strategy was to select one week of the two-week time period. For most families, we viewed days 4–11 so families could get acclimated to the cameras. In our debrief interview, families reported that they forgot about the

cameras in 1–2 days and lived their lives normally (Golann et al. 2019). In a few cases, we chose alternate days to analyze if there were not sufficient adult–child interactions on that day. The seven-day period included both weekdays and the weekend.

A final data reduction strategy was to focus on food interactions. We had initially reviewed all parent–child interactions for several families but realized that this approach was too time-intensive. We thus selected food interactions as a focal point because these were prevalent across all families and typically involved interactions between adults and children. Mealtimes are a useful lens to study parenting because they have traditionally been a space for adult socialization of children and for communication between adults and children, particularly in middle-class households (DeVault 1994; Ochs and Shohet 2006). Family mealtimes have been seen as central to establishing family rhythms, connection, and structure (Cinotto 2006). Although we recognize that food itself is culture (Montanari 2004), and that the possibility of classed approaches to food selection, preparation, and presentation are important inquiries in their own right (Bowen, Brenton, and Elliott 2019; Ochs and Shohet 2006), these questions are outside our theoretical focus here and explored in other ongoing work.

Based on our initial review of all parent–child interactions in a few families, we judged that the types of parent–child interactions we observed during mealtimes were comparable to those we observed throughout the day. This narrower interactional focus, however, limits our ability to examine certain parenting behaviors such as organization of children’s activities and interventions in institutions (Lareau 2003).

We used eight (four working-class and four middle-class) of the remaining nine families to seek confirmation or disconfirmation of our findings. For these families, we focused on four days each, typically days 4–7. The final family in the sample was a poor family and thus excluded from our analysis comparing working-class and middle-class families.

Data analysis

As opposed to a traditional grounded theory approach, in which researchers enter the field with a blank slate, we take an abductive approach (Tavory and Timmermans 2013), testing existing theories against what we observe in the data. Such an approach facilitates the construction of new theories by way of encounters with surprising findings. When an existing theory does not adequately explain a process, researchers develop new theories and concepts to better fit the data. As discussed, we are working with theories about social class differences in parenting that suggest that middle-class families are more child-centered and flexible, whereas working-class families are more role-centered and rigid (e.g., Bernstein 1971; Bourdieu 1990; Lareau 2003).

We developed an analysis process that combined strategies used in video studies and qualitative/ethnographic work. From video studies, we borrowed the data reduction strategy of content logging and the use of collaboratories for collective viewing and interpretation of video data. From qualitative/ethnographic work,

we adopted analytic strategies of writing memos and narrative summaries, and constructing matrices. A detailed set of guidelines and templates, as well as training and small group and large group meetings, ensured consistency and quality among the research team.

Thematic content logs

For each family, we viewed video data and completed a thematic content log, logging all clips containing a parent–child interaction (we use parent loosely here; we also logged interactions with grandparents or other adults or older siblings) involving food. The thematic content log included: the type of meal (breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snack), the start and stop time of the event, individuals present, location, a narrative description of the episode, and any noticings (reflections on the clip). As we filled in our content logs, we simultaneously engaged in memo-writing to record initial impressions of each family.

Narrative summaries

Drawing from the thematic content log, we constructed a narrative summary for each family for each day, similar to extended fieldnote accounts. Narrative summaries provide a descriptive account of patterns in each family, and are useful for understanding the social, cultural, and economic contexts in which actions occur (Rogoff et al. 1993). For these summaries, we drew from each family’s interview data to provide additional context. Our narrative summaries included: description of the family, description of each member of the family, description of each video-recorded space in the house, timeline, key themes, and narrative description of each day’s events as related to food. We relied on narrative summaries to collectively identify and compare patterns across families.

Matrices

To document and compare strategies across families, we created a master matrix with three categories: flexibility (parents bending rules and expectations), individuality (parents catering to their children’s individual needs/wants), and informality (parents relating to children in a less rigid way). These categories were generated based on central patterns we observed in our data and our familiarity with prior literature on middle-class parenting styles. Under each of these categories, we constructed several subcodes. For “flexibility,” we generated the following codes: setting rules/expectations, bending/not bending rules and expectations, and giving/not giving consequences. For “informality,” we included the codes: flexible/strict use of time, flexible/strict use of space, and flexible/strict/flipped relationships between adults and children. For “individuality,” we used the codes: offering/not offering the child choices, prioritizing/not prioritizing child’s needs, negotiating/not negotiating with child, conversing/not conversing with child, and catering/not catering to child. During our research team meetings, we collectively filled out the matrix, reviewing one family at a time, noting patterns in the family and discrepant examples. By collectively discussing each family, we were able to

benefit from our shared insights, which helped us interpret the practices for each family. Following each discussion, we wrote a memo for each family in which we elaborated on the matrix's findings.

During our analysis and writing process, we realized that our three original category codes were at times overlapping and contradictory, making it difficult to interpret and differentiate families' classed behaviors. We therefore returned to the literature and to our data to determine which behaviors mapped onto broader theoretical and empirical conceptions of social class. We identified the four dimensions of class culture discussed in the literature review (social station, relationship to authority, organization of daily life, and language use) and the associated classed parenting behaviors. Then we applied these behaviors specifically to mealtimes and generated a chart with which to analyze our families (see Table 1). We used this chart to re-analyze fieldnotes for each family, for each dimension, identifying whether the adults predominantly displayed the "working class" or "middle class" parenting styles. If a family regularly employed both styles—that is, more than an occasional switching—we characterized that dimension as both "working class" and "middle class." Finally, we labeled the family as "traditional middle class" or "traditional working class" only if they exhibited the parenting behaviors aligned with all four classed dimensions and labeled them as "blurred boundaries" if they displayed middle-class styles for some dimensions (e.g., social station, relationship to authority, and language use) and working-class styles for others (e.g., organization of daily life).

Research Team

Our research team consisted of a rotating group of undergraduate and graduate research assistants and two faculty members. Team members have diverse racial/ethnic and social class identities, affording us a range of perspectives and knowledge of family life. Our full research team met bimonthly to discuss emerging findings and project logistics. The authors of the article, an Asian-American and White faculty member and a Black doctoral student, also met regularly as a smaller group to complete the matrix and identify patterns within and across families. The lead author of the article is Director of the NJFS, and was involved in recruitment and data collection for the study.

Findings

Following prior research (Bernstein 1971; Calarco 2014; Kohn and Schooler 1983; Lareau 2003), we expected to find distinct parenting styles between middle-class and working-class families. Although we observed traditional middle-class "child-centered" and traditional working-class "role-centered" approaches in half of our families, we were most struck by how norms flipped in the other half of our families. These families displayed divergent social class norms related to social station, authority, and language use. Organization of daily life tended to follow traditional class lines. Table 2 summarizes how we characterized each family's parenting styles along these four dimensions.

Table 1: Overview of Social Class Differences in Parenting during Mealtime.

Dimensions of Children's Class Culture	Middle-Class Parenting Behaviors	Working-Class Parenting Behaviors
<i>Social station</i> Distinctive (MC) vs. Conforming (WC)	• Customize meals for individual children • Cater to children's eating preferences / desires • Use meals to cultivate children's development	• Do not prepare or acquire special meals for each child • Expect children to eat what is offered • Use meals to satisfy basic hunger needs
<i>Relationship to authority</i> Entitled (MC) vs. Deferential (WC)	• Negotiate with children over eating • Allow children to construct or push back against the rules of mealtime	• Issue threats / consequences if children do not eat • Expect children to be submissive and respectful during mealtime
<i>Organization of daily life</i> Managed (MC) vs. Hands-off (WC)	• Manage and structure family mealtimes • Center children's activities or interests during meals	• Meet children's mealtime needs in less planned or routinized ways • Center adult activities or interests during meals
<i>Language use</i> Strategic (MC) vs. Compliant (WC)	• Engage in extended discussions • Provide reasoning for food choices • Elicit children's opinions and ask questions	• Engage in brief exchanges • Issue directives • Tend not to draw children out extensively

Table 2: Characterizations of Families' Class-Based Parenting Styles during Mealtimes.

Family Name	Children at Home	Social Class	Dimensions of Classed Parenting			
			Social Station	Relationship to Authority	Language Use	Organization of Daily Life
Traditional Middle Class (Middle Class → Middle-Class Styles)						
Baker Cohen	Zion (3), Xavier (8)	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class
	Rachel (3), Raphael (6), Lizzie (11)	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class
Liu Nelson	Esther (4)	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class
	Sadie (3), Owen (6)	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class
Traditional Working Class (Working Class → Working-Class Styles)						
Otieno	Layla (2), Mila (4), Yusuf (13), Zayn (16)	Working class	Working class	Working class	Working class	Working class
Smith	Christopher (4), Genesis (15), Caleb (18)	Working class	Working class	Working class	Working class	Working class
Blurred Boundaries (Working Class → Middle-Class Styles)						
Jackson	Daniel (3), Iris (1)	Working class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class/working class	Working class
Jones Michaels-Johnson	Jada (3)	Working class	Middle class	Middle class	Working class	Working class
	Hunter (2)	Working class	Middle class	Middle class/working class	Middle class/working class	Working class
Miller	Crystal (3), Ian (13)	Working class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class
Blurred Boundaries (Middle Class → Working-Class Styles)						
Parker	Ally (3)	Middle class	Working class	Working class	Middle class/working class	Middle class
Wilson	Charlie (3), Michael (6), David (10)	Middle class	Working class	Working class	Middle class/working class	Middle class

Note: The ages of children are reported in parentheses. Social class was determined by parental education and occupation.

We highlight examples from families that exhibited traditional middle-class and working-class approaches and then provide examples from families that displayed blurred boundaries. These examples are selected to illustrate the larger patterns we observed in each family. All names used in this study are pseudonyms.

Child-Centered—Traditional Middle-Class Approach

We expected middle-class families to adopt a “child-centered” approach by treating their children’s *social station* as distinctive (e.g., customizing meals to children’s preferences and catering to children’s desires); by extending *authority* to their children (e.g., allowing children to construct or push back against the rules of mealtime); by *organizing* mealtime in deliberate and managed ways (e.g., ensuring children sit at the table and eat properly); and encouraging children’s *language use* surrounding food (e.g., asking for their opinions and giving explanations for food choices). Four of our six middle-class families adopted this child-centered approach traditionally associated with middle-class parenting

The Cohens are a White family with three kids; the parents are in their 40s and both are working professionals. Like a traditional middle-class family that thinks of their children’s social station as special or exceptional, the Cohens regularly try to cater to all the different interests of their children as they can. One way this manifests is in making different types of food for each child. For instance, one Sunday around 4:30 p.m., Mom heated up Chinese food for two of the children to see if they wanted to eat before visitors came over. Rachel, the youngest, screamed that the food was “yucky” and pushed it away. Mom replied, “Then, you don’t have to eat it. Daddy can give you a yogurt in a minute.” Rachel ate a few bites of yogurt, then was distracted by the visitors. About an hour later, after the guests had left, Mom checked in with the kids in the living room:

“OK, does anybody need anything to eat?” Rachel, hoisting herself onto an armchair, immediately answered in a squeal, “Me-e!” Mom replied, “What do you need?” and walked to the kitchen before Rachel could respond. Rachel slid off the chair and headed towards the kitchen, mumbling, “I need some . . .” Speaking to Rachel from the other room while putting things away in a kitchen drawer, Mom interrupted, “Some what?” Entering the kitchen, Rachel thought aloud, “some, some, some . . .” before settling on “some mac and cheese.” Rachel walked over to Mom, leaned her hands on a step stool, and repeated clearly, “Can I have some mac and cheese, Mom?” Mom looked at her and replied, “Yes.” Opening the fridge, Mom then called to Rachel’s sister, “Do you want some of this soup from yesterday?” Her sister called back, “Yes, please.” Mom then called out to Rachel’s brother: “Do you want anything?” “What do we have?” he asked. Mom answered, a little more brusquely, “That’s it. Just some leftovers. Do you want anything? Yes or no? Do you want eggs?” He responded, “I will have eggs . . .” As she walked over to the stove to prepare the food, Mom clarified, “Okay, what kinds of eggs? Scrambled, you mean?”

Although the evening had already been hectic with multiple groups of visitors coming to the house, Mom took the additional time and effort to tailor meals to

each child. Instead of offering one meal for everyone's dinner, Mom agreed to make macaroni and cheese for one child, heat up a second unique food (leftover soup) for a second child, and make scrambled eggs for a third, even though it clearly taxed her energy. She also extended authority to Rachel, not reacting negatively when Rachel refused to eat the Chinese food that she had initially expressed interest in. By explicitly telling Rachel that she did not have to eat it, Mom supported Rachel's right to make her own decisions about what she wanted and did not want to eat. Sociologists have argued that middle-class families treat children in a personalistic rather than positional way, treating them as individuals rather than members of a group. In other words, children are seen as distinctive, having their unique preferences that should be attended to and accommodated rather than viewed in a categorical way as children who should defer to their parents' authority.

The Lius are an Asian professional family with a four-year-old daughter Esther. Consistent with middle-class parenting norms, Mom and Dad structure mealtimes as an opportunity to teach their children. Mealtime lessons include norms around eating (not wasting food, eating at a moderate pace, eating one piece of bread at a time, and washing hands before eating), as well as academic instruction (teaching words in different languages, reading, and conveying knowledge). On a Wednesday during dinner, for example, Mom gave an extended lesson to Esther on how to pronounce the "r" in fruit:

As the family was beginning their dinner, Mom turned to Esther to ask what she had eaten for lunch at school. Esther mumbled out a reply that her parents could not quite make out. After some back and forth, Mom laughed and said, "Oh, I got it. Cucumbers and ranch dressing. French dip, right? Pizza and fruit." Esther corrected her, "No, fuit." Mom replied, "Frrrrruit. Frrrr. Don't forget the r sound. Not fuit, frrrrruit." Mom and Dad shared a laugh as Esther tried to say "fruit." Her parents continued enunciating the word and having Esther practice. "I think this is the New Jersey in you," Mom suggested. "You're not enunciating your r's. Very soft r's." Esther conceded, "That's why I'm not really good at it." Mom prompted, "Not really good at what?" Esther replied, "The r sound." Mom continued, "I think it's because you're not hearing the r sound. Use your listening ears. Hard r sound sounds like rrrrr rrrrub your engine rrrrrr rrrrrrrr." Mom instructed Esther to curve her tongue, noting that she would not be able to pronounce the sound with a flat tongue. Esther repeated the "r" sound until Mom exclaimed, "Yes, you got it! That way people can understand you. I thought you said fuit today."

Reflecting middle-class parenting styles, Mom views dinner as a time to cultivate Esther's habits, skills, and knowledge. Mom's "strategic" language use is evident as she provides reasoning for why she thinks Esther is not pronouncing the "r" sound and offers concrete strategies for how to make this sound. She also explains why it is important to pronounce words correctly and asks Esther to repeat or elaborate unclear statements. This lesson on pronunciation is one of many that occur during this sit-down, home-cooked family meal—earlier in the conversation, the parents

also ask Esther about what she did at school, what grows in a vegetable garden, and whether she remembered a word in German.

Consistent with prior literature, in these traditional middle-class families, parents cater to their children's preferences, treat them more as equals in interactions, structure mealtimes to cultivate their skills, and draw them out in conversation. Although these families may occasionally draw on working-class styles (e.g., using directives and offering convenience foods on a busy evening), they largely follow along expected class lines.

Role-Centered—Traditional Working-Class Approach

Compared to the "child-centered" approach of middle-class families, we expected our working-class families to adopt a "role-centered" approach by treating their children's *social station* as conforming (e.g., expecting children to eat what is offered, not preparing special meals for each child), by establishing clear *authority* relations (e.g., expecting children to be submissive, giving consequences for refusing to eat), by taking a hands-off approach to the *organization* of mealtime (e.g., allowing unstructured meals and offering ready-made convenience foods), and by limiting *language use* with children (e.g., using shorter directives and not engaging in extended discussion with children during mealtime). Two of our six working-class families fit this type.

The Smiths are a working-class Black family with three children. The children's grandfather and uncle also live in the household. In the Smith household, adults' and children's roles are more clearly defined, with adults exerting greater control over what children eat. Adults frequently use directives and meals are often unstructured. For instance, on a Monday around 4 p.m., Dad came home with a large subway sandwich. He prepared a plate with sandwich and chips for Christopher, age 4, and left it in the living room for him to eat:

Christopher's uncle sat on an armchair, watching TV and eating his sandwich. Pointing to the plate on the side chair, he directed to Christopher, "Eat your sandwich." Christopher, standing on the opposite side of the room, looked at him and replied, "Huh?" His uncle continued to point his finger to the plate and repeated, "Your sandwich." Christopher began to approach the sandwich and then stopped. His uncle repeated, "Are you gonna eat it?" Christopher, clapping his hands and stomping his feet to a beat, replied, "I am. I'm gonna wait for my dad to give me it." His uncle replied, "Get it yourself."

As we can see here, mealtime is less structured, not occurring at a set time or place, with Dad leaving the plate in the living room for Christopher to eat as he pleases. The uncle encourages Christopher to eat, but he speaks in short directives and does not engage in extended discussion with Christopher, as follows traditional working-class norms around language use and authority.

Later in the evening when Mom comes home, she relaxes on the couch while looking at the TV. Christopher is the one to prompt her about dinner, repeatedly asking her, "What you wanna eat?" She ignores his question, not catering to him or prioritizing his needs above her own. When Christopher asks his mom to help

him get his leftover sandwich, she directs him to get it himself and he runs to the kitchen to retrieve it. Over the next stretch, Christopher goes back and forth between kneeling in front of the couch and taking a few bites of his sandwich, and engaging in other activities. For example, he grabs a wire and swings it in circles while crawling on his knees around the living room. He goes over to vigorously rock the Lazyboy chair. He dances and chats with his Mom. Several times, Mom redirects him to eat his sandwich, which he does. At nearly 9:00 p.m., Mom leaves the house to grab dinner for herself, and when she returns, she gives Christopher a few bites of her meal. Across this evening, the Smiths take an in-the-moment, laissez-faire approach to eating, with food needs dealt with as they come, rather than as a traditional organized whole-family “event” where the adults constantly cater to the children, often at the expense of their own interests.

The Otienos are a Black working-class immigrant family where parents are from Kenya. In addition to the mother, father, and five children, there is an uncle, cousin, and aunt who are often present in the household. Relationships between adults and children in this household are role-oriented and hierarchical, and for children, the central requirement is eating when it is time to eat. When not eating, children are expected to be quiet and out of the adults’ way. This role hierarchy was on display one Saturday during breakfast:

The older children and two adults (uncle and mom) sat at a long rectangular wooden table for breakfast, the children seated next to each other in white plastic booster seats. The two adults, sitting at the heads of the table, spoke to each other in Swahili, while the children at the table looked between them but did not speak. Near the table, the aunt was carrying two-year-old Layla. She put her down and took a chapati (flatbread) from the cake dish in the center of the table and tried to feed a piece to Layla. The aunt then sat down at the table with Layla still on her hip and continued to feed her while talking with the uncle. Layla did not speak or respond, even when the uncle reached his hand out to her for a handshake.

In some ways, we might view a moment like this as evidence of a more middle-class managed, rather than laissez-faire, organization of daily life. A home-cooked meal was prepared, and the timing and place of eating appears organized and structured, as all family members are seated together at one large table. However, other aspects of this moment are more hands-off. Rather than cultivate children’s skills, knowledge, or conversation, children are silent and not involved in adult exchanges. Children are expected to (and do) conform to set behavioral expectations, and they neither make their desires known nor are catered to by adults. A strict boundary between adults and children is evidenced by not only the symbolic distance between the children and adults conversationally, but also the physical space between them. An adult only breaks the boundary between herself and child when actively feeding Layla. Although Layla is permitted to refuse some of the food offered to her, the adults do not engage in extended negotiations with children over food nor do they offer explanations or choices for what is being served. Although these approaches to mealtime may reflect ethnic and/or immigrant status as well, they also reflect more

traditionally working-class interactional styles rooted in deference and submission to authority.

As we can see in these interactions and others like them, these working-class families follow expected patterns, centering roles rather than children's individual personalities or preferences; adopting more hierarchical, directed relationships between parent and child; organizing meal-time in a less structured manner; and using shorter directives with less room for children's pushback or negotiation. Although they allow for some autonomy in their children, they do not compromise their role as the authority figure in the household, treating their children as one of many whose individual needs do not supersede the collective.

Blurred Boundaries—Working-Class Families Adopting Middle-Class Approaches

Interestingly, four of the six working-class families adopted strategies that resembled a child-centered middle-class approach rather than a role-centered working-class approach. These parents regularly catered to children's individual preferences, more typical of the distinctive approach to social station among middle-class families, despite having economic constraints that would presumably limit their ability to offer choices. They also established more fluid boundaries and engaged in negotiations with their children, relinquishing a degree of power and authority to their children in decision-making around food. At times, they used more directive language and at times drew children out and engaged in more extended explanations. Only their organization of daily life tended to follow a more traditional working-class, laissez-faire approach.

For example, the Jacksons, despite being a working-class Latino and Black family, regularly adopt middle-class interactional styles when it comes to offering food and managing their child's eating process. Like other children in this study, Daniel, age 3, regularly refuses food. However, his parents pepper him with food choices virtually every time eating happens, which suggests more individual customization and entitled relationship to authority than would be expected in a working-class family. A typical example of the extensive amount of choices offered to Daniel is captured one Sunday morning after 11 a.m. Three girls were visiting the home and were playing at the dining table, a long wooden table pushed up against the wall in the kitchen. Daniel woke up late, after the others had eaten, and sat at the end of the dining table playing with his car. His mom, who was seated next to him, was studying, her textbooks spread out in front of her on the table:

Daniel extended his arm out towards his Mom, Pop-Tart in hand. "Is it yummy?" she asked, turning to look at him. "Eat the rest of your pancakes then." Pointing to his plate which she had earlier prepared, she asked, "Do you want a banana instead?" Daniel replied "No" and pushed the plate farther from him. Mom responded gently, "You gotta eat something. . . eat a little bit more, go ahead eat a little bit more." As Daniel took another bite of the Pop-Tart, she nudged him, "You got it." Mom returned to studying and then looked back as he put the Pop-Tart down on the table. "You want some strawberries?" she offered. Daniel

responded, “huuh” and turned his body to the side to get down from his chair. Mom waved her hand “no” and asked him if he wanted some juicy juice. She then pushed his chair out to let him get out.

Although Mom is busy studying for her nursing classes and monitoring the girls in the kitchen, she gives Daniel her individual attention and tries to accommodate his eating preferences. Mom offers Daniel three different breakfast foods (pancakes, a banana, and strawberries) and allows him to leave the table without eating more than a few bites of the Pop-Tart. This kind of catering to the child is more typical of middle-class families but is clearly adopted here in this working-class family. During other mealtimes, we find similar patterns, with Daniel’s parents offering a plethora of choices, encouraging Daniel to eat, and after an extensive period of Daniel “standing his ground” (i.e., not eating, doing what he wants instead, and saying “no”) or acquiescing as minimally as possible (i.e., eating a bite or two), his parents often bending their own rules. For instance, Mom aspires for Daniel to eat healthy food first before junk food but will eventually allow Daniel to eat a less healthy option just to get him to eat. Allowing children to push back, make demands, and acquiesce undoubtedly blurs the lines between parental authority figures and children, which is often more commonly seen in middle-class rather than working-class families like the Jacksons.

The Millers are a White, working-class family who also adopt unmistakably middle-class approaches. The Millers regularly cater to their child’s individual desires, suggesting a more distinctive notion of their child’s social station, and change or compromise expectations by negotiating with their near three-year-old, Crystal. The family often expects Crystal to finish what she is given to eat before asking for new food or play, eat her main meal before dessert, and avoid multiple desserts. Nonetheless, these expectations are often eschewed, especially because Crystal is a skillful negotiator, illustrating both the “strategic” language family members use and the more entitled relationship to authority that Crystal has. A moment that captures Mom’s willingness to negotiate (and typical willingness to acquiesce to it) unfolds below:

Mom and her adult niece sat on either side of Crystal. They engaged in conversation at a dinner table cluttered with papers and gift bags. After a few bites of rice, Crystal pushed her plate away and began to lick her fingers. Crystal then stood up and headed into the living room while asking Mom, “Mommy, can you start my movie?” Mom looked over at Crystal’s plate and called after her, “You need to eat your dinner.” Hearing Mom, Crystal stopped walking and turned to face Mom. Crystal then threw her hands back and yelled, “Can you please start my movie? I’m tired and sleepy.” Mom glanced at her niece and gave her a smirk before getting up and walking over to the living room to Crystal. As Mom walked away, her niece remarked, “Next time I wanna get out of something, I’m gonna say I’m tired.” Mom turned to Crystal in a stern voice, “You can’t eat anything else until you finish your dinner though. So, don’t ask for any snacks, okay?” Crystal replied, “I won’t.” The niece, still in the kitchen, then called out in a frustrated tone, “That seems unlikely!” Mom grabbed the remote and

put something on for Crystal to watch. Mom then walked back to the dining table and continued to talk to her niece.

Like other children in this study, Crystal tried to solicit an opportunity to do what she wanted instead of eating dinner. Rather than stand her ground as Daniel did, Crystal drew on persuasion and appealed to her mother's emotional sympathy: being too "tired" to eat lent itself to a more passive restful activity, like watching a movie. This tactic worked, because even though Mom knew she was being manipulated, which her smirk at her niece and the niece's sarcastic comment betrays, she still allowed Crystal to watch a movie—relinquishing her authority and granting it in part to her daughter. Furthermore, when Mom attempted to re-assert her power by demanding that Crystal not eat anything else until she finished her dinner, her niece undermined her, recognizing "that seems unlikely," suggesting that a child-centered approach is far more typical in this family than the role-oriented one that might be expected.

However, even though Mom eventually lets Crystal leave the meal, up to that point, the mealtime was managed and structured. Mom had prepared a meal, everyone had gathered to eat at the table, and the adults and children were all engaged in conversation. Such moments were fairly typical in this household. These patterns indicate a more managed approach to family life that, despite this family being a working-class family, tends to align with middle-class approaches.

In the Jones' household, a working-class Black family, Mom is a single parent who lives with her mother and brother. Meals are not regularly eaten together, as Mom is often at work during mealtimes, and Jada regularly watches a phone or refuses to eat the food her grandmother prepares for her during mealtimes. All of this is more characteristic of a *laissez-faire* approach that is consistent with working-class organization of daily life. However, both the mother and grandmother adopt clear middle-class interactional approaches to meals that reflect a more distinctive social station than conforming one and a more entitled relationship to authority than a deferential one. They individualize the mealtimes and expectations to the needs and wants of three-year-old Jada. They offer choices, seek her approval, and prioritize her needs as is typical of a traditional middle-class family. For example, on a Tuesday morning, Mom prepared oatmeal for Jada's breakfast before Jada headed to preschool:

Mom, sitting at the kitchen table, put a spoonful of oatmeal in front of Jada, offering it to her. Jada replied by shaking her head and mumbling "mm-mm" (no). Mom asked her if she was "not hungry," if she just wanted "some animal crackers." Jada left the kitchen. Mom asked Jada if she was ready for school and Jada whined no. Mom instructed Jada to come and put her shoes on, repeating her statement twice. After there was no response, Mom started to scroll through her phone. Eventually, Mom called out again to Jada and begged her to "Come on" and put on her shoes. She then looked up and asked, "What is that?" Jada walked into the kitchen carrying a large bag of Skinny Pop popcorn nearly her size. Mom asked, "What is that? Popcorn? You want some popcorn? Come here." Jada silently handed her mom the bag of popcorn and Mom opened it. Jada excitedly jumped up and down, reaching her

hands towards the opened bag. Mom told Jada that she needed to eat her oatmeal first (“just a little”) and then she could take the popcorn to school. Jada started to protest. Mom responded to her protest and said that if she didn’t eat a bite of oatmeal, Jada couldn’t have popcorn. Jada then ate a bite of oatmeal. Once she did, Mom silently poured some popcorn into a bowl. Jada then took the bowl and started to eat the popcorn while standing next to Mom.

Despite having prepared the oatmeal, Mom did not insist that Jada eat it but instead offered another option, animal crackers. Jada asserted her own preferences in retrieving the Skinny Pop for herself and Mom conceded in allowing her to eat the snack. A more role-oriented, authoritative, and hierarchical parent-child relationship typical of a working-class family might result in a parent standing her ground or refusing to acquiesce to the child, but this approach reflects a more middle-class approach that considers the child’s social station as distinctive, worthy of individualized treatment, and more equitable in power/authority-sharing.

The more fluid boundaries between adults and children seen in this family may serve to empower the child’s sense of agency, choice-making, and ultimately, what Lareau (2003) calls an emerging sense of entitlement—a consequence of what is traditionally considered to be middle-class parenting. And we do see instances of entitlement from Jada. Although money is tight in the household, Jada makes demands of what she wants purchased. For example, after shaking the empty Oreo package on the kitchen table one morning, Jada tells her grandmother, “You need to buy some more cookies.” Rather than reprimand her for her directness, Grandmother says she needs to check her account to see if she has money in her account. Later on, when the grandmother and mother are talking on the phone, Jada jumps into the conversation and yells, “Mommy, mommy, bring the cookies home.” Mom, who is at work, does not react negatively to this interruption but asks Jada what kind of cookies she wants. Jada’s boldness in making demands contrasts with her grandmother’s much more hesitant request. After Jada asks for cookies, her grandmother interjects, “if we’re taking orders,” and asks Mom if she can pick up some cheese salsa and chips.

In all these working-class households, across race and family structure, we see evidence of a child-centered parenting style. Catering to individualized preferences, sharing levels of authority in the household, and being willing to negotiate rules and outcomes in order to cultivate healthy, fed children all reflect patterns we would expect to be more characteristic of the middle class. We continue to see more of a hands-off, working-class approach to organizing mealtimes in these families, possibly because these families are comparatively more strapped in terms of finances, time, and adult caregiver attention than their middle-class counterparts.

Blurred Boundaries—Middle-Class Families Adopting Working-Class Approaches

Working-class families were not the only ones to exhibit blurred social class boundaries in parenting. Two of our six middle-class families combined elements from working-class and middle-class parenting styles. The Wilsons and Parkers took a

much more authoritarian approach with their young children around mealtimes. Although these families at times recognized children's preferences, they often set clear and strict expectations about what to eat and when, sticking to their rules despite push-back and at times using a directive language style that has been considered more working-class.

The Wilsons are a professional class White family with three boys under ten. Unlike other middle-class families who treat their children as "distinctive," the Wilsons demonstrate limited willingness to customize or cater to children's individual preferences when it comes to food choices and consumption. They do not regularly offer choices to their children about what they eat and refuse to acquiesce or negotiate when children do not want what is offered. Organization of daily life does appear more managed, in line with middle-class styles, as meals appear to be planned in advance and the family regularly eats dinner together. However, Mom (almost always) prepares what she has on hand without asking for the family's input and does not capitulate to the children's protests by changing or altering their meals. For instance, one afternoon after coming home from preschool and playing upstairs, Charlie, nearly 4, went downstairs to the dining room to ask mom for a peach:

Charlie walked from the living room where the news is playing into the kitchen and quietly told Mom, "I want to eat some . . ." Mom set the tray of fruit that she was carrying down on the dining room table. She dismissively replied, "No, you don't need any. I'm just going to put it here if anybody wants one." "I want to eat. . ." Charlie continued. "No," Mom repeated firmly. Mom headed back to the kitchen and Charlie lay face-down on one of the chairs and began to whine. "Fine. I want peach . . . Mommy, I want peach, I want peach, I want peach." Mom continued to walk around the kitchen unfazed by his whining. She replied, "Nope." Almost under his breath, Charlie repeated over and over again, his voice gradually getting louder, "I want pea . . . I want pea . . . I want a peach. I need a peach. I want a peach!" Mom again insisted, "No!"

No matter how much Charlie tries to stand his ground, a tactic employed by children in other families we observed, Mom does not relent, negotiate, or bend the rules. Charlie's parents are keen on children eating during set mealtimes in contrast to the snacking that occurs throughout the day in other families. When Charlie complains about being hungry, his parents tell him that he is not hungry, is bored, or has otherwise already eaten enough. When Charlie asked for a snack on another day, Mom (who does not often allow snacks) did not ask him what he wanted. Instead, she reached into the refrigerator, pulled out an apple, and handed it to Charlie, who took it without commentary or pushback. Such interactions not only reflect an expectation that Charlie maintain deference to Mom's authority, but interactionally demonstrate Mom's use of compliant language. This emphasis on obedience suggests that children's social station is more conforming than would be expected in a middle-class family.

A similar dynamic between adult and child exists in the Parker family, a mixed-race professional family where the mother is Latina and the father is White. In contrast to patterns of negotiation observed in other middle-class families, there are

few negotiations between Ally, age 3, and her parents over food—again, reflecting children’s social station as conforming rather than distinctive. Unlike in other middle-class families, Ally’s parents do not make special meals for her at dinner, though they do acknowledge some of her meal preferences. In addition, Mom in particular assertively adopts more compliant language in sticking to her rules about limited eating between meals. For example, on a Sunday evening before dinner, Ally and her mom had finished decorating a jewelry box and making cookies together for dessert, notably reflective of managed, intensive parenting activities characteristic of the middle-class. Ally was watching her mom prepare dinner, and started to whine when her mother turned her attention from her:

Mom walked away to continue cooking. Ally called for her from her seat at the dining room table. “You want something to eat?” Mom asked. Ally said yes. Mom opened the fridge and scanned for a snack. “I’ll give you some apple,” said Mom. “No,” Ally snapped. “Apples or nothing,” Mom responded quickly. “Oh, um, apple,” Ally conceded. Mom replied, “Alright.” Then Ally asked if they were going to have dinner as she played with her stuffed animal at the dining room table, and Mom told her “soon,” which is why she didn’t want Ally to eat too much now. Mom then handed Ally a container with apple slices, and said, “Delicious, enjoy.” Ally immediately grabbed an apple from the container, and she replied, “Thank you, Mommy,” to which Mom answered, “You’re welcome, my love.” Ally then started eating the apple slices.

When Ally objects to the apple Mom offers to her, Mom reacts with a firm statement that demands compliance with her authority: “Apples or nothing.” Ally accepts this ultimatum and proceeds to eat the apple. After Ally finishes her apples, she asks Mom for more but Mom tells her that dinner is almost ready so she cannot have more. Ally pushes back on this, but Mom does not yield. Another instance of non-negotiation occurs when Dad after breakfast one morning asks Ally whether she can put her bowl and fork in the sink. Ally makes several attempts to negotiate including complaining that her belly hurts, but Dad holds his ground.

The Wilsons’ and Parkers’ regular use of directives illustrates a departure from the typical language use patterns of the middle-class. Directives, which interactionally convey power/authority and command compliance/submissiveness from those they are spoken to, are often used in working-class homes because they reproduce the hierarchical and authoritarian structure of working-class jobs (Bowles and Gintis 1976). Directives are less frequently heard in more affluent homes because, consistent with their professional and institutional experiences outside of the family, adults tend to treat children as interactional equals rather than submissives. In these families, though, directives are freely used. For instance, the Parkers sprinkle directives throughout their dinner conversation to teach their daughter proper table manners: “Don’t put too many things in your mouth at once;” “Chew it all up;” “Don’t talk with your mouth full;” “Don’t mash up your food;” “Don’t waste all that corn,” and so on. These quick interjections reinforce the parents’ power and authority and appear more like a working-class style than a middle-class one.

We should note that the Wilsons and Parkers, like many middle-class families, also at times offer extended explanations and justifications alongside their directives. Moreover, their use of a more authoritarian style tends to be related to efforts to build middle-class embodied cultural capital (manners and body language) and know-how (healthy eating and food moderation) during mealtimes, showing how their approach is one of deliberate management in cultivating their children's values and habits. Thus, although these families do not fit neatly into traditional middle-class norms, they do display aspects of classed parenting styles.

Validity Checks

Given our small and selective sample of 12 families, we are not able to speak to how widespread our patterns are. To increase confidence that the patterns we identified were not idiosyncratic to the families we observed but reflective of broader trends, we analyzed four additional days of parent-child interactions during mealtimes in eight additional families that participated in the video study. We found blurred boundaries in four families and traditional parenting styles in four families (see Table 3). These patterns confirm that class-based parenting styles persist but also suggest that the boundaries between working-class and middle-class parenting styles may be more porous than sociologists have previously considered.

One might argue that our study families as a whole may have had more interest in and knowledge about parenting as they agreed to participate in a study on parenting. This may be particularly relevant to the working-class families whose interest in parenting may have led them to have more exposure to middle-class parenting approaches. Although we acknowledge this limitation, we also offered a significant monetary incentive for participation. Three of the six working-class families that adopted middle-class approaches mentioned the \$500 study incentive as a reason for participating. Other reasons for participation included trying something different, being part of a research study, and wanting to "show off" their children.

Another argument is that the blurred families in our study may have more heterogeneous class backgrounds. For example, they could be upwardly or downwardly mobile or have mixed parenting styles due to the parents being from different social classes. To assess this, Table 3 displays our four categories of classed parenting alongside families' socioeconomic characteristics including education, income, occupation, race/ethnicity, and languages spoken at home. We find some support for heterogeneity within the middle-class blurred families as two of the four families (both in our validation sample) have lower incomes and education levels than expected. In these two families, the mothers have middle-class occupations and education, whereas the fathers have working-class occupations and education. However, this is not the case for the Parkers and Wilsons, the two professional families adopting working-class norms, showcased earlier. For the blurred working-class families, we do not observe noticeable distinctions. Drawing from our interview data, we also examined what families reported as their social class growing up. In two of the blurred middle-class families, one parent reported growing up in a working-class home. With the exception of one mother, all of the parents in the blurred working-class families reported being raised themselves

Table 3: Parenting Style and Characteristics of Larger Sample of 20 Families.

	Child-Centered (Traditional Middle- Class Style)	Role-Centered (Traditional Working- Class Style)	Blurred Boundaries (Working Class → Middle-Class Styles)	Blurred Boundaries (Middle Class → Working-Class Styles)
Family name ^a	Baker, Cohen, Liu, Nelson Davis, Moore	Otieno, Smith García, Washington	Jackson, Michaels- Johnson, Jones, Miller Peterson, Lewis	Parker, Wilson Chen, Ruiz
Education	Two-year college- graduate degree \$100–200K+	High school–four-year college ^b \$25–100K	High school–two-year college \$25–150K ^d	High school–graduate degree ^c \$25–150K ^e
Reported income	Accountant, education administrator, informa- tion technology, project manager, fashion designer	Retail sales, automotive service, nursing assistant, custodian, insurance claims clerk, metal worker	LPN, HVAC technician, retail sales, mechanic, truck driver, insulation worker, customer service representative	Research scientist, education administrator, technician, in- surance underwriter, teacher
Race/ethnicity	Asian, Black, Latino, White, Multiracial	Black, Latino	Black, Latino, White	Asian, Latino, White
Language(s) spoken at home	English, Chinese	English, Swahili	English, Spanish	English, Chinese, Spanish
Total families	6	4	6	4

Notes: ^aTop row designates focal 12 families. Bottom row designates additional 8 families. ^bOne working-class parent had a college degree from country of origin but had a low income and worked in an occupation that did not have managerial authority or autonomy. ^cOne family had one parent with a high school degree and the other parent with a graduate degree. Another family had one parent with some college and the other parent with a four-year college degree. ^dOne working-class family had a high income of \$100–\$150K but neither parent had a four-year college degree or worked in an occupation with managerial authority or autonomy. ^eTwo middle-class families had a low income of \$25–\$50K, but one parent per family had an occupation that required a four-year college or graduate degree. LPN = Licensed Practical Nurse; HVAC = Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning.

in a working-class family. Thus, although the mixed social class backgrounds of the parents may contribute to the blending of parenting styles in the middle-class families, it does not explain the blurred styles in the working-class families.

Finally, an alternative explanation could be that interactions with young children, who are developmentally much different than older children previously examined in family socialization studies, elicit different kinds of responses from adults. For example, parents may be more assertive with younger children because they are establishing family norms and expectations, or conversely, they may provide more individualized catering and negotiation because younger children make more demands and have more immediate needs. However, we suspect this is not the primary driver of heterogeneity in parenting styles across social class because, except for the case of one working-class family where an older sibling was treated in a more authoritarian way than the younger, we tended to observe similar parenting behaviors among older and younger siblings. Additionally, the idea that young children bring out different kinds of parenting does not account for why some middle-class parents would adopt more assertive working-class norms with their young children, while working-class parents would adopt more flexible middle-class norms with theirs.

Discussion

Of enduring sociologist interest is how social class shapes us and impacts how we navigate the world. Yet scarce attention has been given to the early years of life when children are thought to learn and embody class-based dispositions (Bourdieu 1990). To fill this gap, we used a unique set of in-home video data to analyze how working-class and middle-class families socialized their young children during mealtimes. Video captures detailed interactions in ways interviews and surveys cannot, and also facilitates research inside homes where access is hard to gain. With calls for greater transparency and replicability in qualitative research (Bishop 2007; Murphy, Jerolmack, and Smith 2021), video also can address concerns over validity in ethnographic research (Lubet 2017) and allow multiple researchers to work together to interpret data.

Given decades of work that have asserted social class differences in socialization, our study is significant in showing emerging patterns that challenge assumptions of working-class parents as hierarchical and directive and middle-class parents as egalitarian and flexible. We found that a number of working-class families adopted middle-class ways of interacting with their children, for example, peppering their children with choices for what to eat, bending rules to accommodate their children, and putting children's needs ahead of their own. These families looked similar to traditional middle-class families in that they treated their children as distinctive, customizing food interactions to their children's preferences. By contrast, we observed middle-class families that adopted distinctively working-class strategies, setting clear expectations and not bending to accommodate children's preferences. These families freely used directives and asserted their authority in a way that seemed aligned with traditional working-class approaches to adult-child relationships. Although we might expect some blurring of parenting styles in all families

(e.g., a middle-class parent snapping in frustration at a child), what was striking in our blurred families was the persistent pattern of class-based behaviors that were opposite from what much prior research would lead us to expect (Bernstein 1971; Calarco 2014; Kohn 1969; Lareau 2003).

These patterns are suggestive, not definitive, as half of our families displayed traditional classed parenting styles. Still, they point to two possible shifts: (1) middle-class childrearing norms may be diffusing to the working class and (2) middle-class families may be redefining their ideal childrearing norms. First, as parenting advice and models become more ubiquitous and easy to access through widespread internet use, working-class families may be consuming and adopting middle-class parenting norms. The majority of the working-class families in our study mentioned using the internet for sources of information on parenting. One mother, from a working-class family that adopted middle-class approaches, spoke about how she joined a Facebook group of moms who had given birth in the same month and has remained with the group for many years. She mentioned learning about and reading a parenting book on discipline that was recommended in the Facebook group. For the last several decades, middle-class parenting norms, like talking to and praising children, social disapproval of spanking, and other related behaviors have been institutionalized as “good parenting” or “research-based parenting” and thus have been promoted in the pediatric medical community (Borowsky et al. 2004), in public educational television (Piña, Torres, and Griffith 2023), in printed works on parenting, and in parenting workshops (Cucchiara, Cassar, and Clark 2019).

Second, among middle-class parents, we have seen an emerging generational reaction to some aspects of the child-centered styles that produced young adults with too much entitlement and not enough self-sufficiency. Bestselling books like *How to Raise an Adult* (Lythcott-Haims 2015) and *The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed* (Lahey 2016) have pushed back against helicopter parents who cater to their children’s every whim in favor of giving children more independence and responsibility. Research has also found that entitlement can have negative consequences when students fail to take responsibility for their own learning (Golann and Darling-Aduana 2020) or are ill-equipped to deal with criticism, loss, or negative strain (Harvey 2023). Middle-class parents may be repurposing some traditional authoritarian parenting behaviors as an antidote to this perceived problem. For these middle-class parents, cultivating children’s advantage may require maintaining and using, rather than negotiating or relinquishing, their own parental authority and control. A new norm of middle-class parenting thus may be forming that blends concerted cultivation with more strictness and top-down direction, which in fact is consistent with earlier work that observed that middle-class parents often asserted a high level of control in structuring their children’s activities (Weininger and Lareau 2009).

We are limited, of course, in drawing strong conclusions because of our small sample size of 12 focal families, the heterogeneity of our families, and our intense peek into only one week of these families’ lives centered on mealtime interactions. Food is a central part of daily household life and affords an opportunity to study how parents and children establish and negotiate expectations. At the same time,

mealtimes provide less insight into dimensions of parenting like the organization of daily life because they do not reveal how families arrange activities for their children throughout the day and week. Moreover, mealtime itself, though once central to middle-class household management, has become less structured with the growth of dual-earner households, the juggling of busy family schedules, and the availability of convenience foods (Castillo, Duggan, and Golann 2026). Thus, although we feel more confident about shifts related to how parents engage with and relate to children, we are less clear on the extent to which families are modifying how they oversee and manage their children's everyday activities.

We thus propose three directions for future research. First, we need larger observational studies of classed parenting to assess how widespread these shifts are and whether they extend beyond mealtime interactions. Although our own study was limited by the time-consuming process of data analysis, future researchers can take advantage of rapid advances in AI and big data to facilitate analysis of large-scale qualitative data (Golann et al. 2026; Tajik et al. 2026). Second, future research could focus on parents' decision- and sense-making. Where are contemporary parents getting their information from about how to parent? What are their goals? Understanding parents' goals and strategies will lend further insight into why and how social class norms around childrearing may be shifting. Finally, studies of parenting should explore other factors that intersect with social class that may shape family socialization goals and strategies. Immigrant status, for example, may help explain the persistence of traditional classed parenting styles. In developing nations, families often must rely on family and community for survival, which also reinforces traditional roles and hierarchies (Inglehart and Baker 2000). It is likely that class will continue to be a necessary but not sufficient explanation for family socialization patterns.

The stakes of parenting are becoming especially salient for families of all social classes in a moment where multiple social and economic realities collide—technology is rapidly changing, ubiquitous, and easy to rely on as a child-rearing tool (McClain et al. 2025); middle-class standards of living are increasingly becoming out of reach for families in the United States as wealth inequality continues to increase (Leicht and Fitzgerald 2023), higher education becomes increasingly expensive and good-paying jobs are more scarce and competitive (Kalleberg 2011); and political polarization has not only created new stakes in the culture war over what is good and right but has also fractured and isolated communities (Jacoby 2014; Lee and Bearman 2020). As parents reflect on how best to position their children for future success in unsettled times, they may be more intentional in how they raise their children (Swidler 1986). It is a ripe time to study family socialization, and fortunately we are equipped with new tools to do so.

Notes

- ¹ Kohn (1969) differs in classifying self-direction as a middle-class behavior as he connects self-direction with internal motivation, which he sees as characteristic of the middle class.

- 2 Bernstein (1971) argued that working-class families had tighter boundaries between spaces, whereas middle-class families used space more flexibly. This contrasts with more recent literature that suggests working-class families are more relaxed at home (Williams 2012).
- 3 Deb Roy wired his own home to record the first three years of his son's life, amassing 90,000 hours of video data (see Roy et al. 2015). Our study, although much shorter in duration, includes 21 families. Since our study was completed, there have been two large-scale in-home video studies of children: 1kd project, which follows children through their first 1,000 days (<https://wellcomeleap.org/1kd/>), and the PLAY project, which will record over 900 children at play in their homes (<https://play-project.org/>).
- 4 Although we learned that \$500 was a significant inducement for some families, we did not consider it an unreasonable amount to offer given that families were videotaped for two weeks and participated in three additional interviews.

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