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# Inequality and the family

30 Sep 2022

*It may be near impossible to recreate Lareau's "concerted cultivation" outside a middle-class family but intervention targeted at a wider audience – instead of means testing – could ameliorate inequality reproduction*

In the [World Inequality Report \(WIR\) 2022](#), the findings reinforced the general understanding of current global wealth and income inequalities. The top one percent of the global population captured 38 percent of global wealth growth between 1995 and 2021, with the bottom 50 percent accounting for only two percent. The share of wealth accumulated by the top 0.01 percent (520,000 adults) rose from seven percent to 11 percent in 2021.

"These gaps in income and wealth have been fueled by large-scale macroeconomic phenomena such as globalisation, shifts in technology, and the nature of economic drivers," explains **Teo You Yenn**, Head of Sociology at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in Singapore.

Those shifts have been translated into a bifurcation of 'good' jobs and 'bad' jobs, which in turn reproduces inequality via the family.

"Families bear the costs of various patterns of inequality. Families in which the earners enjoy strong incomes and good benefits, compared to families in which earners have low incomes and few, if any, benefits have very different quality of life and standards of living, and access to security.

"A second reason to turn to the family is that there are important feedback loops between work and family. Inequalities in the economic realms, the workplace, are reproduced by the functions and activities that occur within family units."

## PARENTING MATTERS

Teo made those comments at the recent Lien Fung's Colloquium titled "Everyday Consequences of Class Inequality" in which she cites the ability of parents with 'good' jobs to pay for private lessons that give their children a leg up in school, and having some form of schedule flexibility that strengthens familial ties and stability. Even when better off parents are unable to be around physically, they can pay to outsource the care of children.

Teo also highlighted the work of American sociologist Annette Lareau, which describes the style of middle-class parenting as "concerted cultivation" which is not easily replicated by lower-income parents.

"It involves a wide range of organised activities and parents intervening in their children's interactions with institutions. It involves parents allowing for a lot of parent-child negotiations

and bargaining [which] combines to generate in class-advantaged children an emerging sense of entitlement and a set of habits that match the expectations of the institutions surrounding them.

“It allows them a way of being in the world where those things are turned into forms of capital, or turned into qualities that get rewarded. Kids are raised to have different capacities, habits, tastes, aspirations, and indeed cultures that are then differentially rewarded or punished.”

She adds: “It’s not just time and money, but also knowledge and experience with navigating certain institutions. You can see that parents who have done well in certain education systems will have the knowledge of how to navigate those, and that knowledge is transmitted.”

In addition, better off parents transfer wealth to their offspring when they pass on, which further exacerbates inequality.

“The transfer of wealth is an important aspect in the reproduction of class inequality,” she says. “It can be used to secure housing, it can be used for starting businesses, finance college or graduate school. Each of these things give youngsters a head start in life.

“Since access to wealth is uneven, younger cohorts of people start off on very unequal footing. That’s what I mean by reproduction.”

## **FIXING INEQUALITY WITH MERITOCRACY? OR FIXING MERITOCRACY?**

Within the Singaporean context, the disparity in schoolchildren’s readiness for primary education manifests in the ability to read and perform basic arithmetic. Teo says this poses tough questions of meritocracy.

“Singapore’s system rewards precocity. By Primary 1, we expect children to be able to read,” she notes. “That means the disadvantages that occur early on in life translate into different paths very early on. The system does not reward purely on merit.

“When we have a system in which people are rewarded very early on for certain things that they can do, like read, that is when you see that class and family resources are more important. One thing to tweak is how and when we reward kids with different capacities.

“There’s no reason for rewards to be set up so early because, from an educational perspective, lots of children across class lines can take a much longer time to develop than they are given now. Teachers should be given a lot more time to ensure kids can do X, Y, Z. That is not going to be detrimental to our society. In fact, I think it would be better for the human resources that we can harness.”

She adds: “In meritocratic societies, the ideology assumes that capable and hardworking people would succeed. It implies that other features which are historically rewarded should not be the features that continues to be rewarded, which can include race and gender. Often, meritocracy is viewed as a way to overcome racial or gender discrimination, and that people should be rewarded based purely on what they can do.

“A lot of what sociologists have pointed out that many things that are rewarded aren’t purely about hard work or a person’s capacity. If that were the case, we would not see so much correlation between a young person’s education outcomes and their parents’ education outcomes, for example. You would also not see, in elite institutions in particular, disproportionate numbers of people coming from higher income families than lower income families.”

She concludes: “If it were purely on merit, this disproportionate distribution would be the result of intelligence being purely hereditary, which we know is not true.”

## HOW DO WE INTERVENE?

What can we do about it? Teo lists a few questions that must be asked to address the issue:

- What conditions are necessary for families to thrive and flourish?
- What conditions are necessary to ameliorate the current inequalities that exist across families?
- What are the institutional and policy conditions that are required?
- What kind of care infrastructure do we need to have?
- What kind of wage structure do we need to have?
- What kind of safety nets and education system do we need?

Teo points to philanthropists and those in positions of power “often having a desire to solve the problem at the level of children by trying ensure children in low-income families have access to resources that are comparable to those in middle-class families”. However, material resources alone cannot reproduce the effects of concerted cultivation.

The second issue that arises from such an approach is the stigma that it carries.

“When policies or benefits are targeted at a very small proportion of people, and these are people at the bottom of society, it becomes stigmatising because they are targeted and means tested,” Teo laments. The way to overcome that would be to target the intervention at a wider audience.

“One example would be the baby bonus in Singapore. Nobody thinks of the baby bonus as a handout with all the negative connotations that the word ‘handout’ implies because it is aimed at a large population. The policy has in mind the middle class. It’s possible to have benefits aimed at the middle class because we can decide, as a society, that supporting children is important because they are important for society and the economy.

“Programmes that are designed for a large population are much less likely to have stigma attached. It’s much more likely for there to be a buy-in that these are ways to help everybody.”

“More programmes should be directed in this way. What we should be thinking about is, ‘How do we improve access to high-quality childcare for everybody?’ instead of targeting the lower-income groups.”

*Teo You Yenn was the speaker at the Lien Fung's Colloquium, "Everyday Consequences of Class Inequality" that was held in collaboration with the SMU Wee Kim Wee Centre on 8 Sep 2022. Emily Soon, Lecturer of English Literature at the SMU College of Integrative Studies was the moderator.*

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