

Calarco, Jessica (2018) *Negotiating Opportunities: How the Middle Class Secures Advantages in School*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.

Review by Jenny Stuber

Contemporary culture is fraught with anxieties about how to raise children and advice for doing the same. And contradictions characterize much of this conversation. On the one hand, public discourse mocks this generation of ‘snowflakes’—children who were raised to be overly sensitive and in need of personal attention and accommodation. On the other hand, there is concern and even mockery of ‘free-range parenting’ and other efforts to allow children to be curious, self-governed creatures. But how does social class figure into the culture of parenting and beliefs about what it means to raise a good child? Should parents raise their children to be assertive and to have their social and educational needs met at all costs, or should parents raise their children to be patient and cooperative, and to try to solve problems on their own, before seeking adult intervention? The complications surrounding parenting, and especially how social class informs child rearing, is just one theme addressed by sociologist Jessica McCrory Calarco in her fantastic new book—making it suitable for parents, educators, and those with an interest in sociology. Those interested in working-class studies will find in this book a careful analysis of class cultures and a respect for the cultural styles of working-class school children.

Questions about social reproduction in education have animated the field and captured the interest of sociologists since the 1970s, when Pierre Bourdieu first introduced his groundbreaking theory. Over the next several decades, researchers have diligently provided empirical illustrations of Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction, illustrating how, for example, schools themselves operate according to a middle-class habitus and how parents pass on class cultures to their children through socialization. Jessica McCrory Calarco’s remarkably rich and sensitive book, *Negotiating Opportunities: How the Middle Class Secures Advantages in School*, contributes to this tradition, filling a long vacant gap. Calarco picks up where her mentor, Annette Lareau, leaves off: using a longitudinal research design, she explores how working- and middle-class elementary school children internalize the class socialization imparted by their parents, and how they activate this socialization within classroom settings. Her research fills an important gap in theories of social reproduction, vividly illustrating the link between culture (socialization and action) and social stratification.

Drawing on three years of field work in a mixed-class school, located in a suburb of a large East Coast metropolitan area of the US, Calarco examines how elementary school children (many of whom she later observes as 7th graders) interact with their teachers. More specifically, using detailed classroom observations, supplemented by in-depth interviews with children, their parents, and their teachers, she examines three ways students interact with their teachers, with separate

chapters focusing on how students seek, or attempt to seek, *assistance*, *accommodations*, and *attention*. She focuses on differences among working- and middle-class students across these domains, ultimately arguing that the strategies used by middle-class children to seek assistance, accommodations, and attention yield them profits, while the strategies of working-class children go unrecognized and, therefore, fail to yield profits. The profits earned by middle-class students include opportunities to develop cognitive capacities and enhance their academic achievement, but also opportunities to be creative and to feel like schools are set up to attend to their comfort and provide for their convenience (116). It is through these classroom strategies, and how teachers respond, that children's class-based behaviors translate into 'stratified profits' within the educational system.

Like her mentor, Annette Lareau, Calarco provides a rich account of the 'class cultures' that school children employ in the classroom. While she does not focus her analyses on how these cultures get inculcated in children, or the reasons why parents may favor these cultural styles in their parenting, she illustrates the nature of these cultures and their consequences. She shows, for example, that the classroom behaviors of middle-class children reflect their *strategies of influence*, whereas the strategies of working-class students reflect their *strategies of deference*. In characterizing their strategies as such, Calarco echoes the earlier work of Melvin Kohn, who found that middle-class parents favor creativity and working-class parents favor conformity, as well as the work of Annette Lareau, who labeled the parenting strategies of middle-class families as concerted cultivation and the strategies of working-class parents as reflecting the logic of natural growth. In her work, Calarco ably shows middle-class students as proactive and direct in seeking assistance and attention. Even when teachers wish to blunt their requests, these students relentlessly lobby for their questions to be answered (how to approach a math problem, clarification on a social studies assignment) and requests for customization (to go to the bathroom, to submit late homework, to alter the directions for a project). In their strategies of deference, working-class students are relentlessly polite and compliant. Rather than pushing their own needs and agendas, Calarco describes these children as sensitive to classroom dynamics; quietly putting their hands down after starting to sense that the teacher is no longer in the mood to answer questions and eager to seek attention for helping another student rather than for an individual accomplishment. Ultimately, the classroom behaviors of working-class children align with their own and their parents' wishes to demonstrate a sense of *character* and avoid reprimand, while the behaviors of middle-class children reflect their own and their parents' wishes to prove a sense of *achievement* and reap rewards. Through these observations, Calarco contributes to a body of scholarship that has documented the 'class cultures' associated with people situated in various strata of the class hierarchy.

More than contributing to theories of social reproduction, Jessica McCrory Calarco makes a valuable contribution to the *sociology of childhood*. Like Bill Corsaro and others who paved a path before her at Indiana University — where the author is now a faculty member — Calarco takes children seriously. She sees children as active agents in their social worlds, making meaning, solving problems, and strategically interacting. Her work is especially rich in observing what children *do* in school. An immensely talented ethnographer, she brings detail to students' facial expressions and body language: the significance of Jesse's (a working-class student) shift from eagerness to slumped shoulders and the meaning of a hand going up to ask a question, only to be withdrawn a minute later. The love, dare I say, and dignity that she shows for the subjects of her

analyses is remarkable. She brings a sensitive eye as well as a keen sociological instinct to her observations and the meaning she sees in these students' daily experiences.

Finally, Calarco provides a nuanced analysis of teachers' role in the reproduction of middle-class advantage. Unlike earlier work on social reproduction, Calarco does not argue that middle-class students are successful in school because they *match* the cultural expectations of the schools and teachers. Rather, she argues that middle-class students are especially skilled actors, pushing teachers to match their own cultural styles and expectations, rather than the other way around. Calarco is especially sensitive in explaining why teachers often capitulate to the demands of middle-class students: at some point, if teachers resist the demands of middle-class students, their jobs may be in jeopardy due to the influence of middle-class parents. To some extent, teachers allow themselves to be co-opted by middle-class parents because pushing back against them and trying to level the playing field is laden with potential conflict and just too risky (149). This observation leads Calarco to place the onus for change squarely on the shoulders of middle-class parents. While teachers need to learn to say 'no' to requests from students in excess of what is fair or practical, middle-class parents need to 'be mindful of the consequences of wielding their privilege' and to recognize the limitations of advocating exclusively for their own children's self-interest (199).

Negotiating Opportunities is an excellent book. Alas, it is not a perfect book. Substantively, I would have liked a bit more attention on the degree to which students sought assistance and attention from peers rather than their teachers. The analyses included focus primarily on student-teacher dynamics, and do not provide as much exploration of peer-to-peer interactions as I would have liked. Stylistically, Calarco's writing is meticulous: each substantive chapter is organized in the same way, beginning with a vignette, moving through a brief literature review, presenting the data analysis, and conclusions. This provides great consistency, ensuring that her reader understand the nature of the argument. Additionally, she begins her book with a presentation of existing theories, diligently situating her working with existing scholarship and identifying the gaps, and then ends the book with an entire chapter on 'Alternative Explanations.' Her airtight presentation is so meticulous and deliberate, however, that it verges on defensive at times. It is as if she placed herself within the role of reviewer, which is natural, and preemptively responded to every critique that a reviewer might have. While such a strategy is, of course, smart, it leads to a slightly diminished sense of discovery and engagement on the part of the reader, and a slight feeling of being beaten over the head with the argument. This is a minor critique, however, of a book whose time has come and which will surely leave an enduring mark on the field.

Reviewer Bio

Jenny Stuber is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of North Florida. Her 2011 book, *Inside the College Gates: How Class and Culture Matter in Higher Education*, investigates how social class and first-generation status shape how students navigate the college environment, focusing specifically on their social interactions and extra-curricular involvement.

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