3

Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Social Class Corporeality

Abstract: This chapter begins with a brief historical overview of sociology of the body as a way of framing the later treatment of Bourdieu’s work on habitus, field, capital, and body hexis. Following this summary, this chapter then turns to Annette Lareau’s work on child-rearing logics that correspond with social class position. After exploring Lareau’s “concerted cultivation” and “accomplishment of natural growth” orientations, this chapter theorizes on how teachers might “read” the body language of children in different social class positions and the instructional consequences of such interpretations.

Keywords: child-rearing practices; habitus; sociology of the body

Conceptualizing the important theoretical frameworks of Pierre Bourdieu and Annette Lareau requires some framing in the historical trajectory of sociology from which their work emerges. As such, this chapter begins with an overview of Marcel Mauss’ work on techniques of the body, from which emerges Bourdieu’s central focus on habitus. Following this overview of Mauss is an exploration of Bourdieu’s theory of social class acquisition, which focuses on habitus and three additional central elements of Bourdieu’s theory: cultural capital, field, and body hexis. Understanding these features of Bourdieu’s theory sheds light on the central findings of Annette Lareau and her hallmark work on the social class influences on child-rearing practices. In this important work, she employs habitus, field, and cultural capital to reveal how social class influences language use, organization of time, interactions with institutions, and ultimately the perceptions of agency cultivated in children, via the differential “logics” of child-raising apparent in families of different social class status.

These findings highlight the ways that social class influences parental choices and behavior relative to children and the values inherent in the practices parents employ. However, one of Bourdieu’s central features—body hexis—is not taken up by Lareau in any deliberate manner. Thus one aim of this chapter is to apply Bourdieu’s concept of body hexis to Lareau’s findings to theoretically hypothesize what sorts of embodiments one might see emerging from different social class upbringings. Using Mauss’ focus on “body techniques” as a backdrop, this chapter asks what sorts of hygiene practices, uses of the body during verbal communication, and other corporeal practices are associated with the different parenting logics that align with social class status? In other words, what are the embodiments of high degrees of agency experienced by children reared in upper-class ways? What are the embodiments of the constrained agency of children reared in working-class ways? What are the implications for “self-control” that emerge from each of these pictures of embodiment?

Early sociological thinking on the body: its “absent-presence” and Marcel Mauss

The study of the body has taken different orientations in sociology throughout the evolution of the discipline. Early sociology, in its attempt