

***The American Dream and the Power of Wealth:
Choosing Schools and Inheriting Inequality in the Land of Opportunity
Second Edition***
Heather Beth Johnson

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Preface and Acknowledgments to the Second Edition

It has been just about ten years since I finished writing my first book, *The American Dream and the Power of Wealth*. As I now finish the revisions for the second edition, I can't help but reflect upon all that has occurred – both in our country, and for me personally – in the past decade. As a country we have witnessed the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States; we have experienced a major economic recession and home ownership crisis; we have seen the cost of higher education continue to skyrocket; and so much more. These things have only served to make the issues at the core of this book even more pronounced and powerfully important than they were ten years ago.

Personally, the past ten years have been my first decade of mothering. My twin sons, Kyle and Owen, were born in Haiti in 2004 and we adopted them in 2005. I gave birth to my daughter in 2008. Becoming a mother has made me even more fundamentally committed to working on the social problems that this book addresses. As a mother, I have had to directly face the decisions that I had only researched and written about in the first book. Having to make very personal decisions about where to live and where to send our own kids to school has made my understanding of the sociological phenomena I study even more complex and nuanced. I can relate, more than ever, to the people interviewed for this book.

In the years since the first edition was published, I have been amazed by the reaction to *The American Dream and the Power of Wealth*. Before the book was published, I had already been presenting its core themes and arguments at conferences and speaking engagements. Without fail, every time, the reaction was strong. After I'd speak, audience members from all walks of life would come up to me – sometimes with tears in their eyes, always with looks of astonishment on their faces – to tell me how

impactful what they had just heard from me was. I was told the same sorts of things over and over: “Oh my gosh! I always *knew* this, but I didn’t really *know* it! You just gave me the keys to unlock an explanation for all this!” It always struck me that “all this” meant “their life” and “the world around us.” What was even more striking was their awareness that they *had been aware*, just unable to articulate it before it was raised to the surface for them. These things were, of course, gratifying to hear (I think the best sociology is the sociology that brings clarity to what went previously unspoken, yet intuitively known). Even more importantly, these reactions told me that I was, indeed onto something really important. Because of all of this I knew, a little bit, about what was coming when the book was finally published.

Still, the reaction to the book took me by surprise. I hadn’t anticipated that it would speak to people in all of the ways that it did. Since the publication of the first edition I’ve received a steady stream of emails from readers who have just finished the book. Some of these emails come from undergraduate students, who had the book as required reading for a course. Some come from the general public, who pick the book up and read it for lots of different reasons. But my favorite emails have come from graduate students in sociology who are studying race and class inequality in the United States. Most of them tell me that they are basically on their own at their respective universities, trying to navigate the rocky terrain of understanding the on-the-ground phenomena at the root of contemporary inequality. When I hear that my book has helped them move forward in their understanding, or that the book has re-affirmed their commitment to their own work despite feeling marginalized, I am reminded of why I wrote the book in the first place.

In the preface to the first edition I had written this: “my hope is that my work in this book will get people to think about the paradoxes and dilemmas I have written about, that they will begin to notice things that they might not have before, and that they will

talk about it at home and in the world.” My goal in all of my scholarship and teaching – including that in this book – is to get people to think in new directions. To hear that this book does that is the greatest gift I could receive professionally. That, simply, was my goal. And that, simply, is what motivated me in doing the second edition: to continue to frame meaningful questions for people – questions that would re-frame their understanding of the world.

The questions at the heart of this book are even more pertinent today than they were ten years ago – for us as a country, and for me personally. This new edition was written to make the book more fully relevant to today’s readers, with updated data and new illustrative examples. I’ve also added a new set of qualitative research data from a series of interviews conducted with twenty white children from affluent families. These interviews were completed in 2004 as part of a research project with sociologist Margaret Hagerman. In the second edition I am not only asking what parents are thinking about inequality and the American Dream, but to what extent children believe in the promise of the American Dream and how they explain, justify, and understand the stratification of American society. The children’s interviews allow us to access affluent white children’s perspectives on class inequality in America and provide insight into the power of ideology in the minds of our youngest generation.

I’d like to thank Margaret Hagerman for her assistance, not just with the research project on kids’ perspectives on inequality, but also for her research assistantship in preparing this second edition manuscript. Maggie began as a student of mine, but has become a dear friend and valued colleague. From my perspective, she represents the best of the up-and-coming sociologists in the United States today: she is asking all the right questions, and is helping to pave the road to new answers about inequality and social justice. Maggie’s work is of the highest caliber, and I am grateful for her help to make my work better.

I also need to acknowledge all of the many other people who have played critical roles in making this book possible from the beginning through today – first and foremost Tom Shapiro, who was – and always will be – my mentor and advisor in the world of sociology. Many thanks also to Melvin Oliver; David McBride; Stephen Rutter; Lisa Keister; Dalton Conley; Annette Lareau; Karen Albright; Patricia Arend; Jessica Kenty-Drane; Jessica Holden Sherwood; Lehigh student research assistants Sara Barker, Troy Boni, Julia Schulman, Shahin Shaghghi, and Xochitl Mota; research grant funding from the Ford Foundation, Northeastern University, and Lehigh University; and, probably most importantly, all of the people who not only agreed to be interviewed, but gave of themselves fully, during the various stages and phases of this book project. I'd also like to acknowledge the many Lehigh students I've had over the years in both undergraduate and graduate courses who have pushed my thinking and expanded my horizons. I have experienced at Lehigh just how much a professor can learn from her students. Thank you to all.

Lastly, I want to thank my little family, who sacrifice so much, and put up with so much, so that I can do what I do. My three children are the joy of my life and I have learned more from them than could ever be put into any book. I wonder if they will read this book someday, and if so, what they will think of it? Most importantly, I acknowledge my husband and life-partner, Braydon McCormick, to whom this book was, and is, dedicated. He is the rich center of my very rich life (no pun intended!). No material wealth compares to the wealth that is a true union. In our home we often reference the Haitian flag's motto: "L'Union Fait la Force" ("in union there is strength"). It is only through our combined efforts that we shall overcome. That is true on the most micro level (thank you Braydon!), and the most macro. I do hope that there is a day – not so far in the future – when all of us who are asking, "How can this be?" can shift our focus to different questions.

Heather Beth Johnson

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