

CULTURAL CAPITAL

The term cultural capital was introduced by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) in order to better understand patterns of inequality—e.g. such as “educational inheritance” or the differential ability of the sons and daughters of educated parents to be judged as better students by their teachers—in educational outcomes in French schools. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) suggested that educational institutions are “imprinted” with the styles of thought and classification as well as habitual orientations toward institutionally validated cultural goods and experiences of the status groups that exercises control over them (e.g. higher-education professionals).

The acquisition of these tacit competences in culturally privileged households lead to an unconscious, undirected but ultimately systematic development of an organized set of expectations, concepts, styles of appreciation, and systems of practical action in the world that Bourdieu(1984) later came to refer to as the “class habitus.” This class habitus is an enduring (but dynamic) cognitive structure that produces thoughts, reactions (aesthetic, cognitive and moral) and choices (e.g. what to buy, what to major in, who to marry) that are in tune with and attempts (within constraints) to recreate the environment during which it developed by making “choices” that are consonant with its conditions of development. This is mainly because the class habitus is based on a set of practical dispositions which unconsciously construe and expect the future to be similar in shape and pattern to the past, unless subject to a process of radical disconfirmation (e.g. by way of systematic exposure to a series of countervailing experiences).

The thought styles and habitual cultural practices that are rewarded in formal school settings, according to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), are similar to those that are more likely to be promoted and imparted in middle class households and are qualitatively distinct from those that are imparted in working class households. Bourdieu differs from other arguments as to the impact of socialization on educational outcomes (e.g. those provided by Basil Bernstein) in thinking of parental

socialization as less driven an unintentional process of “code” transmission mediated by linguistic forms and more by an *implicit, embodied, unconscious immersion* in an entire social, symbolic and material environment (mainly composed of parental practices keyed to instruction and socialization, but also material objects, built environments, as well as specific sensory and cultural experiences).

Empirical studies of the effects of cultural capital on educational outcomes that have followed Bourdieu’s lead have usually operationalized cultural capital using parent’s and children’s rates of engagement in legitimate cultural practices (e.g. reading of “serious” literature, going to the museum, etc.). These studies have shown that indeed seemingly extra-institutional patterns of practices in the realm of symbolic goods consumption impact intra-institutional outcomes in the educational system. These range from better grades for children who engage in legitimate arts consumption to better chances of making a given educational transition for children of culturally privileged parents.

Conceptualizing cultural capital

The concept of cultural capital however, has enjoyed a much more flexible and generalized applicability beyond the study of educational outcomes. This has been mainly due to the impact of Bourdieu’s (1984) classic study *Distinction*, where the notion of cultural capital was extended to explain differential rates of engagement in the (institutionally legitimated) arts. Released from its functional linkage to a narrow set of outcomes in the early work co-authored with Passeron, cultural capital now came to denote a *generalized, transposable disposition* to apply the “artistic scheme” (e.g. the Kantian notion that aesthetic form should be privileged over content) to cultural products hailing from symbol-producing artworlds of different degrees of institutional legitimation. This is what Bourdieu referred to as the “aesthetic disposition.”

The key argument in *Distinction* is that the aesthetic disposition functions as cultural capital in late-modern societies, because it is the most institutionally legitimated

form for the appropriation of aesthetic goods, although it is not the only existing mode of reception. In Bourdieu's (Bourdieu 1984) terms education provides certain social groups with access to cultural capital. Bourdieu concluded that it was this differential capacity to apply aestheticizing cognitive schemes to the different symbolic goods produced by the formalized fields of the more legitimate (and sometimes the popular) arts that served as the primary differentiating factor among audiences in late-modern societies and as the key to the cultural advantage of the more educated segments of the dominant class. Those segments of the population who possess the most cultural capital would therefore be more likely to be knowledgeable about and be heavily engaged in the arts, which is precisely what he finds in his empirical analysis.

The three modes of existence of cultural capital

In an influential essay, Bourdieu (1986) argued that cultural capital can exist in three analytically distinct states: in its *embodied* state, cultural capital consists of an implicit set of cognitive-emotive schemes of perception, appreciation and action relevant to the manner in which institutionally legitimated cultural objects and aesthetic experiences are appropriated and thus “consumed.” A more explicit aspect of embodied cultural capital may be manifested in an ability to be able to *verbally* express the aesthetic qualities of a given cultural object. Bourdieu was clear, nevertheless, that the relative ability to “redescribe” implicit aesthetic experiences into explicit language differed according to the *mode of acquisition* of cultural capital. Those who have acquired the bulk of their cultural capital in the informal family environment (in contrast to those whose main source of cultural capital is the formal educational system) are predicted to be relatively less likely to explicitly verbalize and schematize their aesthetic experiences, while at the same time being *more* likely to make the “right” aesthetic choices. Cultural capital may also exist in what Bourdieu referred to as an *institutionalized* state, which refers to the possession on the part of the bearer of concrete (and institutionally defined and legitimated) markers of cultural distinction and status rank (such as educational qualifications in

contemporary societies). More specific forms of institutionalized cultural capital appears in the form of the occupancy of objectified posts of cultural authority that assign the bearer the symbolic power to make distinctions that matter within fields of symbolic production (e.g. curator, critic, etc.).

Finally, Bourdieu suggests that cultural capital may also appear in an *objectified* state, in the form of the “direct” possession or appropriation (e.g. ownership through market mechanisms) of institutionally defined *art objects*. For Bourdieu, while the direct appropriation of cultural goods can be a signal of cultural capital, in late-modern societies, pure possession of objectified cultural capital *in the absence* of a demonstrable ability to properly appropriate those products through the (contextually defined) “correct” embodied appropriation of those works had come to be devalued. In fact, for Bourdieu, the two different “fractions” of the dominant class were partitioned mainly according to this division between “indirect” (embodied, associated with patronage of non-profit arts dissemination institutions) and “direct” (objectified, associated with involvement in a literal “market for symbolic goods” associated with the monetary purchase of prestigious art objects) constituted two opposing principles of engagement with cultural works (possibly reconciled in the figure of newly mobile professionals endowed with both embodied cultural capital and the ability to purchase art objects). In spite of the importance of this tripartite distinction between the different forms of cultural capital, most empirical research that has attempted to put Bourdieu’s framework to the test, usually relies on relatively incomplete measures of cultural capital that seldom attempts to disentangle the relative impact of these different forms of cultural capital on the outcomes of interest.

Cultural Capital: Proficiency versus Boundary Definitions

A key interest on the part of sociologists in the notion of cultural capital is the fact that various strands of theory predict that it should be systematically linked with a host of outcomes, especially those having some impact on a person’s ability to reproduce his or her position in the system of status and stratification. However, the

way in which we conceive the *effects* of cultural capital, are clearly dependent on the way in which we define the concept in the first place. In the Anglo-American literature, there are two primary definitions of cultural capital that inform contemporary theory and research. One, partially based on Bourdieu's (1986) influential formulation, defines cultural capital as an *aptitude* or a *skill* acquired in the combined realms of the upper-middle class family and the school system. For instance, DiMaggio (1991: 134) conceives of cultural capital as "proficiency in the consumption of and discourse about generally prestigious—that is institutionally screened and validated— cultural goods..." Following Bourdieu's (1984) rejection of Veblenian theories of consciously guided "distinction," from this point of view whatever benefits accrue to the individual as a consequence of possessing cultural capital appear as an unintended consequence produced by cross-institutional linkages in society-wide cultural definitions of value and worth (i.e. between artistic institutions, higher education and high status professions for instance). It follows that with institutional conceptions of what constitute aesthetic value, certain forms of cultural capital may lose "value" and be replaced by others (Peterson and Kern 1996).

The other major conceptualization of cultural capital in current theory and research on the subject is concerned with addressing what are perceived to be ambiguities in the Bourdieu-inspired definition of cultural capital as "skill" or "proficiency." Instead from the *boundaries* point of view (Lamont and Lareau 1988: 164) cultural capital is defined as "...the institutionalized repertoire of high status signals" useful for purposes of marking and drawing symbolic boundaries in a given social context. This definition of social capital attempts to recover what are perceived to be its origin in a Weberian theory of status group *closure*. Furthermore, from this perspective whatever counts as cultural capital are those symbolic resources that are actively mobilized by members of groups or class fractions to establish their difference from other groups and thus to devalue the cultural resources and symbolic practices of outsiders.

Cultural Capital and Social Capital

Recent research on the connection between cultural capital and the other “forms of capital” isolated in Bourdieu’s influential essay (“social” and “economic”) point to the need to amend both of these very influential notions of cultural capital (e.g. Lizardo 2006). In contrast to the theoretical emphases of the boundaries definition these lines of research lead to the conclusion that whatever counts as cultural capital in the modern system no longer derives its usefulness in creating personal advantage *exclusively* by following a closure logic. With the increasing social and cultural mobility of the upper-middle class (DiMaggio and Mohr 1985) it is unlikely that the use of symbolic goods consumption for the *exclusive* purpose of producing “fences” across groups generates much advantage (although the occasional production of relational closure as high status individuals code-switch in more intimate settings may still do); instead under conditions in which “personal communities” are increasingly disengaged from locality and tradition (Wellman, Carrington, and Hall 1988), the ability to mobilize cultural knowledge to generate “bridges” in the social structure becomes as important as the capacity to mobilize cultural resources to generate closure. This is consistent with the longstanding observation connecting socio-economic status and the ability to reach across wider distances in social space (Erickson 1996).

This suggests that it may be wise to return to Bourdieu’s (1986) initial proposal and define cultural capital in a manner that makes it *interdependent* with the other forms of capital, in this case social capital, and which thus makes it a cultural and historical variable (reference). In Bourdieu’s original formulation, none of the forms of capital—economic, cultural and social—constituted capital “as such” but were to only be considered capital as long as they were able to be “converted” into other forms, through contextually constituted institutional and social mechanisms of conversion. This implies that changing definitions of what counts as “social-capital” (from closure to diffuse networks) will have an impact on what (functionally and institutionally) counts as cultural capital. In this respect, DiMaggio’s definition is

the most consistent with the conceptualization of the role of cultural capital in social interaction, because it highlights not only the notion of cultural capital as “proficiency” in consumption, but also points to its inherent connection to “discourse”, that is *talk*. It is clear that in the most recent literature on cultural taste, cultural proficiencies become actualized (and in as the present analysis suggests, transformed into social connections) by being deployed and activated in conversation. Thus, an important advantage of the proficiency definition is that it points to an explicit and empirically verifiable mechanism through which cultural capital becomes manifested and utilized by individuals during routine episodes of social interaction.