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# FIELD THEORY IN CULTURAL CAPITAL STUDIES OF EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

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## FIELD THEORY IN CULTURAL CAPITAL STUDIES OF EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

### ABSTRACT

This article argues that there is a double problem in international research in cultural capital and educational attainment: an empirical problem, since few new insights have been gained within recent years, and a theoretical problem, since cultural capital is seen as a simple hypothesis about certain isolated individual resources, disregarding the structural vision and important related concepts such as field in Bourdieu's sociology. We (re)emphasize the role of field theory in cultural capital research in education, taking into consideration current concerns in international quantitative research.

## INTRODUCTION

International quantitative sociological research in cultural capital and education, including cultural reproduction studies, is currently suffering from two mutually related problems: an empirical and a theoretical one. In this article, we review and discuss selected empirical studies as a point of departure for a much needed reframing of cultural capital theory in the sociology of education that can pave the way for new and innovative advances in research and knowledge in the field.

The first of the two problems we identify is an empirical one. Despite ever-increasing focus on cultural capital theory in international quantitative research on education since the seminal work of DiMaggio (1982) and DiMaggio and Mohr (1985)<sup>1</sup>, scholars still inquire into largely the same limited list of variables said to cover cultural capital and still dispute fundamental issues such as: Is there really any effect of cultural capital on educational attainment? If there is, who benefits more, high or low SES-family children?<sup>2</sup> What exactly does ‘cultural capital’ designate? How do we measure it? And given these persistent concerns, should cultural capital theory be abandoned altogether (as suggested by critics such as Kingston 2001; and Goldthorpe 2007)? Cultural capital research has long ceased to make ground-breaking advances in our knowledge and understanding of the role of education in modern societies.

This problem in empirical research leads to a theoretical one. According to Sallaz and Zavisca’s (2007) count done in articles in four major American sociological journals, 10 % of the most recent articles cite Bourdieu, but only 9 % of these employ his concepts relationally, as he intended (see also Savage and Bennett 2005 along with our discussion of empirical studies in the next section, including also work done outside the US). In general, cultural capital is seen

and analyzed as an *individual resource* comparable to IQ and possession of dictionaries. This is evident from the theoretical discussions and conclusions in the literature, examined in detail below, but is even more obvious in the strong focus on determining the *isolated (or net) effect* of cultural capital on educational attainment and other dependent variables and in the widespread content with such *ceteris paribus* conclusions. Consequently, one of the prime qualities of cultural capital theory – to provide a theory for inquiring into not only statistical effects in themselves, but most importantly the social reality that produces these effects – remains unexploited, underdeveloped, and even unnoticed.

As Bourdieu (1984, 94) states in discussing the statistical measures of cultural capital: It would be wholly mistaken to locate in any one of these factors [educational level and social origin] an ‘efficacy’ which only appears in a certain *relationship* and may therefore be cancelled out or inverted in another field or another state of the same field... because what is ultimately at stake in everyday struggles over culture is the transformation of the price-forming mechanisms defining the relative values of the cultural productions associated with educational capital and social trajectory...

Scholars risk misleadingly ascribing explanatory powers to isolated statistical effects when these are not regarded in the societal framework in which they exist. For example, number of books in the home may not simply have an effect on grade point average because books increase the child’s cognitive and non-cognitive skills in a simple and isolated sense, books are also a prevailing strategy among high-SES families to distinguish themselves from others regarding literary frame of reference and self-presentation, along with a much wider class-specific strategy of ‘concerted cultivation’ by parents (Lareau 2011). High-SES families

are also likely to be more involved in both school and politics and may therefore indirectly impose their norms and values on the standards of evaluation in the educational system. It is true that some quantitative studies stress that items such as number of books in the home are indicators of a broader notion of cultural capital, but, as we shall see in the following section, this is not always the case, and even when it is, indicators of cultural capital in these studies are most often *de facto* interpreted in a rather ‘isolationist’ manner.

In this article, we focus on relational and structural aspects (most notably, the notion of fields) of cultural capital theory (hereafter, CCT). With this, we also reflect the increasing interest in *field theory* in international sociology, proposing a specific solution to the classic structure/agency problem in social theorizing (Martin 2003, 2011; Dowd, Janssen, and Verboord 2009; Denord et al. 2011; Fligstein and McAdam 2011; 2012; Ellersgaard, Larsen, and Munk 2013). Bourdieu uses the notion of capital in relation to fields as social value which is invested, circulated, and reconverted, producing profits for some social positions at the expense of others, hence generating and reproducing the social stratification of society. Bourdieu expands the traditional economic focus of ‘capital’ to also encompass other aspects of the social, in particular ‘cultural capital’ related to the spheres of education and cultural consumption (Bourdieu 1986). Various forms of capital are being invested and reconverted notably by better-off agents to produce social profits. For instance, money may be invested in private elite schooling for children to intergenerationally reproduce cultural capital holdings. Hence, the notions of field and capital are interrelated through the circulation and reversion of capital leading to a more or less stable reproduction of structures of social positions and social power. Fields can change over time (Bourdieu 1996b), but it is a general assertion in field theory that

the underlying structure of relations tends to remain stable over time despite superficial changes in forms – a classical example being how the ‘schooling boom in the 1960s did not necessarily produce big relational changes (Bourdieu 1984, 132).

Our endeavor is not a simple introduction to CCT and field theory. Instead, we consider the current concerns in the research field. We argue that most quantitative studies claiming to deal with cultural capital in fact do not since they ignore the qualities of the concept of ‘capital’. Rather, these studies can be said to be about individual cultural ‘resources’. To actually engage with cultural capital theory, quantitative studies of educational achievement will need to focus less on isolated effects of individual resources and more on the social structure of resources and how these resources are invested, reconverted, and reproduced as capital.

We are not the first to make such an attempt: one of the most cited sources on the definition of cultural capital provided a similar critique some 25 years ago (Lamont and Lareau 1988).<sup>3</sup> However, this critique had little impact on operationalizations and analyses in prevailing quantitative sociology of education (Lareau and Weininger 2003, 579). We believe it is pertinent to again take up this discussion and address both new and old perspectives and approaches in the research field with the hope of contributing to the exit of the empirical and the theoretical problems in the sociology of education concerning cultural capital.

The article is organized as follows. First, we review existing cultural capital literature in the international quantitative sociology of education to map the various uses, interpretations, measures, and conclusions in which it is employed, and we diagnose its present theoretical and empirical state. Second, we advance an elaborated field theory of cultural capital. Although the theory draws strongly on Bourdieu, it also develops aspects of particular interest to

contemporary sociology of education and introduces a language and logic more affiliated with that of prevailing quantitative sociology of education than was Bourdieu's own. We conclude with some remarks about the societal and political role of sociology of education.

## CULTURAL CAPITAL THEORY RECEPTION IN EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The core problem we address is the understanding and use of CCT in prevailing quantitative sociology. Only seldom do we find outright mistakes and fallacies, but the use of Bourdieu tends to be 'light' or even 'ultra-light'. Some consider cultural capital a 'real' resource individuals can obtain distinguished from other resources (e.g. cognitive, non-cognitive, economic, and others). In these 'real' resource studies, some focus on high-status culture participation (e.g. theatergoing) and possessions (e.g. a piano in the home) as resources in school (Katsillis and Rubinson 1990; Kalmijn and Kraaykamp 1996; Aschaffenburg and Maas 1997; Sullivan 2001; Kaufman and Gabler 2004; Wildhagen 2009). Others within the 'real' resource tradition focus on educational resources in the home, such as books, dictionaries, parental reading, and related items (Teachman 1987; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell 1999; Eitle and Eitle 2002; Jæger 2009). Yet others have attempted to grasp plural aspects of cultural capital, such as the three forms described by Bourdieu (1986): objectified, institutionalized, and embodied (e.g. De Graaf, De Graaf, and Kraaykamp 2000; Kraaykamp and Eijk 2010; Jæger 2009; Zimdars, Sullivan, and Heath 2009; Noble and Davies 2009; Tramonte and Willms 2010; Byun, Schofer, and Kim 2012; Munk 2013).

A different line of studies sees cultural capital as a purely 'symbolic' resource of individual students *distinguished* from 'real' resources (DiMaggio 1982; Kaufman and Gabler

2004; Jennings and DiPrete 2010). For instance, DiMaggio (1982, 190) summarizes CCT in the following way:

Teachers, it is argued, communicate more easily with students who participate in elite status cultures, give them more attention and special assistance, and perceive them as more intelligent or gifted than students who lack cultural capital.

This definition clearly focuses on symbolic resources distinguished from merit.

Within the ‘real’ and ‘symbolic’ individual resource interpretations, comprehensive variation exists which often raises lively discussions over questions such as: Exactly what measures are appropriate? How are they distinguished from other relevant ones? What are the causal ‘steps’ in intergenerational transmission from parents to children? However, we identify some more fundamental problems common to studies across the spectrum of CCT interpretations: the tendency to consider CCT simply as one isolated (net) variable among others. What most scholars argue in their conclusions is that those variables with significant effects could be promoted among low achievers. This view may sometimes be reasonable but omits the fundamental idea that cultural capital is exactly ‘effective’ *because* it is valued and esteemed a legitimate measure of worth by both high achievers and the educational system. Omitting this aspect runs the risk of misinterpreting effects of single items, such as number of books in the home and extracurricular activities, as *themselves* being generators of educational value, whereas they are instead the *means* for value production in a larger educational system.

To take a concrete example of this problem, consider the literature on DiMaggio’s (1982) ‘cultural mobility’ hypothesis, stating that the effect of holding cultural capital is the strongest for the least advantaged. Even though some of these studies, including Katsillis and

Rubinson (1990), Aschaffenburg and Maas (1997), De Graaf et al. (2000), Dumais (2008), Jæger (2009), and Dumais and Ward (2010), conclude a cultural capital effect on educational attainment, it is usually not taken as support for Bourdieu's cultural *reproduction* theory, which, it is argued, holds that the cultural capital effect is the strongest for the most advantaged, thus enhancing reproduction. For example, in favor of the cultural mobility theory, Dumais (2008, 883) concludes that because the measured impact on educational attainment of extracurricular activities is the highest among low-SES students, these students: should thus be strongly encouraged to participate in school-sponsored activities, since these activities especially benefit their math achievement.

This is a reasonable suggestion, but some fundamental questions about the social aspects of education remain unanswered. In particular, why is it that high-SES children (who are also likely to be high achievers) participate by far the most in extracurricular activities but apparently do not benefit from it, whereas the opposite seems to be the case for low-SES children (they participate less, but gain more)?

When some variables viewed in isolation seem to benefit the least well-off, this may simply be because the well-off are *actually* engaged in the measured activities and that those among the well-off who are not engaged in the measured activities provide the same benefits for themselves *in other ways* not reflected in the study. On the one hand, this is a classical 'selection problem' of data not covering the 'true' variation. On the other hand we also point beyond such critique against 'incomplete' models and the problem of 'unobserved' variables – a critique which does not solve the problem of the isolationist methodology. Speaking of *isolated* effects of resources implies not only the (often implicit) assertion that sets

of *particular* resources can actually be *generally* defined – for instance ‘number of books in the home’ despite the obvious variation in the sort of books, the titles, their use in each particular home etc. More importantly, speaking of isolated effects of resources correspondingly implies the assertion that social forces can simply be split up and attributed to such isolated resources as isolated effects without any substantial loss of information. But social forces are not simply the ‘mirror image’ of certain isolated resources as implied by the idea of isolated effects. Social forces emerge from social structures, and if social structures are to be adequately included in analysis, it requires that social forces are considered in a sort of dialectical relationship between on the one hand particular individuals, resources, social situations etc., and the social structures on the other.

To take an example: Becker (2011) finds that even though pre-school education increases the vocabulary of children of parents with low education, and not of those with high parental education, it does not reduce the difference between the two groups, but only the *growth* in the difference between them as they get older. So, the ‘mobility effect’ of pre-school education is not sufficiently strong to counter the structural effect, illustrating how unwise it is to analyze isolated effects without contemplating ‘the whole picture’. Becker (2011) does not draw on cultural capital theory, but the example illustrates a fundamental point here: The seemingly stronger isolated effect for children with low educated parents actually *confirms* their deprived position in the field. When starting with nothing, much can be gained from minimal intervention. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that such intervention can match the comprehensive structure of benefits enjoyed in more advantaged positions. As we argue in the next section, it is

exactly the focus on structural reproduction that characterizes CCT as a distinct sociological *theory*.

Recently, applications of CCT with more focus on structures have become frequent. Studies has engaged in ‘institutional effects’ (Tramonte and Willms 2010; Stadelmann-Steffen 2012; Wildhagen 2009; Dumais and Ward 2010; Jennings and DiPrete 2010; Choi et al. 2008; Sullivan et al. 2010). However, although these studies advance some aspects, they tend to abandon others. First of all, they seldom integrate their understanding of cultural capital with the structural elements of inquiry.

Other studies come closer to the version of CCT promoted in this article by adopting Lareau’s (2011; see also Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003) interest in ‘concerted cultivation’: the middle-class ideal of parents engaging in their children’s development, and their inclination to act collectively vis-à-vis school (Bodovski and Farkas 2008; Covay and Carbonaro 2010; Bodovski 2010; Sullivan 2001; see also Roksa and Potter 2011; Jæger 2009; for a study critical of this view, see Irwin and Elley 2011). From concerted cultivation, Lareau (2011, 2) states: a robust sense of entitlement takes root in the children. These studies consider more deliberately how statistical effects are the product of the encounter between various students and an organized educational system. This, indeed, is a promising and more nuanced understanding of cultural capital than the one found in some of the studies hitherto considered. Notably, it provides a thorough insight into what is actually going on in homes and schools that substantiates the causal relationship between parental background and educational attainment. In other words, this is potentially a way to study how practices are generated through stocks of cultural capital but also by habitus embedded in families, a concept we later elaborate on. But

despite their empirical and analytical qualities, these studies of concerted cultivation would benefit from a more comprehensive and systematic theoretical understanding of what cultural capital designates. Such understanding would also help distinguish their results more clearly from the more simplistic interpretations present in the literature.

## FIELDS AND CULTURAL CAPITAL THEORY

Very few studies of cultural capital in educational attainment employ the important notion of *field* (see Naidoo 2004 for an exception). The idea of a social field differs from how sociologists most often understand cause and effect inasmuch as it considers agents entering a field of objective forces by which they are affected corresponding to their *position*, *characteristics*, and *field trajectory* – not by being affected through direct interaction with any (set of) other elements (Bourdieu 1985, 724; Martin 2011, 272). The field concept was used by Bourdieu to articulate the relational character of the social, i.e. how groups, individuals, and institutions are not so much defined by their objective attributes in themselves, as by their position in the *structure of attributes*. Most notably, social class is not defined by properties (income, occupation, education, sex, race, etc.) but by the structure of relations between properties (1984, 106). This structure is of a double nature since it is itself what defines the valuations of various attributes, but it is also the product of struggles to define this very ‘price-setting’. Bourdieu used the two terms ‘structuring’ (typically with reference to the concept of habitus) and ‘structured’ to point out this double character. This is no empty ambiguity but rather a fundamental of systemic accounts as such. In microeconomic theory too, for instance, prices are not defined by the individual trade, but by the system (or structure) of trades which,

inversely, is a product of the entirety of ongoing negotiations and struggles in single trades. But in contrast to microeconomic theory, CCT is not founded on intrinsic individual ‘indifference curves’, since there is no isolated individual at the bottom of a complex system on which social scientists can rely for simplification purposes. The system must fundamentally be understood as a dynamic whole of interchanging factors in which none can be said to be stable, not even human nature and IQ (or tuition fees and educational policies for that matter). In *Distinction* (1984, 103), Bourdieu states that: the particular relations between a dependent variable and so-called independent variables such as sex, age and religion, tend to dissimulate the complete system of relations that make up the true principle of the force and form specific to the effects recorded in such and such particular correlation.

The most important thing here is not that ‘everything is interrelated’, but that from a CCT perspective it is misleading to isolate factors from the system of relations in which they appear.

The notion of ‘capital’ helps conceptualizing the structures of such relations. In *Distinction* (1984, 114ff), Bourdieu operationalizes social space, composed of three dimensions covering volume of capital, capital composition, and life trajectory, by correspondence analysis of the structures in a set of national SES data. The same variable, e.g. an indicator of cultural capital, is not likely to have the same effect in two different fields. Moreover, it is not even likely to have constant effects within a specific field but will depend on the *position* in the field. The effect of theatergoing or books in the home on educational attainment depends on the social milieu in which it is embedded – and so does the possibility of whether theatergoing and books actually occurs. As argued above in the example of price-setting mechanisms in markets, such

effects do not ‘explain’ the system, neither does the system ‘explain’ the effects. Rather, the one cannot be understood without the other and vice versa. What makes the notion of cultural capital useful is its analytical capacity to illuminate these issues from a structural perspective (rather than an individualistic and isolationist one) and not its equivalence with one (or a set of) empirical items.

To understand this more profoundly, we elaborate aspects of capital that were not explicitly discussed in detail by Bourdieu, possibly because it was implicit in the very concept at his time in France. Just as Karl Marx (1992) employed the notion of (economic) *capital* to illuminate how both physical goods (gold, articles, machines) and virtual funds (money, debt) were different social forms of the same fundamental value – human labor – rather than themselves being intrinsic sources of value (as deceptively suggested by their price), so *cultural capital* is to be *analytically* separated from its manifestations, even though it cannot *empirically* be distinguished clearly from any relevant educational resources (IQ, books in the home, parental education etc.). In two different ways in Marx and Bourdieu’s analyses, capital designates no isolated effect but is a conceptual instrument to reveal the social structures underlying effects. Just as the engineer does not describe the machine by additions of isolated numeric effects by spark plug, cylinder, speeder etc. but by mapping (very tangibly: *drawing*) the structural mechanics of the system, the sociologist could map social structures in terms of capital and field. Attempting to isolate cultural capital or, for that matter, field, is not only difficult, it is misleading since these concepts were made precisely to reveal structures and the relations between system and action. Notwithstanding the controversial validity of Marx’s analyses and the differences between him and Bourdieu, we hold that analyzing capital amounts

to analyzing the structures and their inherent social processes that are constitutive of a stable field of positions by generating internal ‘necessities’ at the individual level.

Here, we embark on how the ‘structural vision’ is related to a certain vision of the individual through Bourdieu’s notion of habitus. Habitus is double-sided, being both a system of categorization (‘structuring’) and a system of categories (‘structured’). In field theory, it is hence the ‘dispositional’ pendant to capital: The embodied ‘character’ developed through a specific field trajectory (or, more generally, a trajectory in the social space, cf. Devine 2013). The growing research tradition trying to assess the (isolated) effects of cognitive and non-cognitive skills respectively on educational attainment engages in an analytical ‘slicing and dicing’ which from a CCT perspective is unlikely to produce tenable sociological results since in practice the relationship between cognitive and non-cognitive skills is one of mutual dependency, of application in a specific social context, and one depending on the system in which this context is situated. Even ‘pure logic’ would always be socially situated, applied and combined with a practical sense of the subject at hand, as is indicated in several studies showing that even sophisticated measures of IQ are biased by such factors as gender, geography, and social origin, indicating that some ‘culture of testing’ is at stake even in the most isolated accounts of cognition (e.g. Fritts and Marszalek 2010; McIntosh and Munk 2014). Rather than denying altogether that there is such a thing as IQ, the concept of habitus allows it to be socially contextualized, notably by approaching the: relationship between classed environments and schemes of language, thought, and modes of specialized cognition (Nash 2003: 446). For sociological purposes, cognitive and non-cognitive skills, including IQ, should not simply be considered as a matter of degree (high or low), but also a matter of kind and modes of practical

application, and differences should be related to the social positions of individuals. Hence, the concept of habitus bridges the analysis of ‘intelligence’ and ‘culture’ on the one hand and the appreciation of students by the educational system on the other, focusing on how the latter is better suited for and approves more of some students than of others.

Drawing on the notion of habitus, research will therefore not implicitly presume that solutions to ‘the problem’ of low achievers should be found among high achievers (‘just do as they do’). For instance, Horvat et al. (2003) illuminate how high-SES parents manage to reproduce the ‘structural alliance’ between themselves (labor market position) in educational alliances for their children (school networks).<sup>4</sup> As Sayer (2011) would put it, these high-SES parents are not simply characterized by a set of ‘values’ (e.g. ‘extracurricular reading is good’, ‘education is important’), but by very specific educational orientations and notably *concerns* that are closely related to their field position. Contrary to sociology assessing isolated effects, field theory attempts, exploiting the linkage of capital, field, and habitus, to relate particular orientations and concerns that are structurally embedded in different fields, such as the field of education (cf. Devine 2013, 394), hence contributing to explaining statistical effects themselves.

Social forces: Positions, capital, and effects

Unfortunately, social scientists usually hold that effects in some (dependent) variables are produced by changes in others (independent). The idea is that *changes* in external forces affect individuals, making those individuals more inclined toward a certain behavior. For instance, an additional year of parental education may be said to raise the likelihood of the child attending college by some specific factor. In field theory, the idea is different as it is not a change in some

other variable that has effects, but the *position* in the field as such (Martin 2003, 4f). In his instructive article on field theory, Martin (2003) makes the analogy of a gravity field: We may find that heavier objects fall faster with some given factor, but a profound understanding of gravity cannot rest on such variance in mass alone – it must also conceive the field of gravity. Considering this seemingly banal statement, we realize that speaking of ‘the effect of the mass of an object on velocity’ is fundamentally problematic for understanding the actual phenomenon of the falling body. One could equally well stipulate an ‘effect of the field characteristics’, but the most precise phrasing would be that the effect emerges in the encounter between an object and a field, each of given characteristics (Martin 2003, 6f). Bourdieu (2000, 150f) writes in *Pascalian Meditations*:

The principle of action is therefore neither a subject confronting the world as an object in a relation of pure knowledge nor a ‘milieu’ exerting a form of mechanical causality on the agent; it is neither in the material or symbolic end of the action nor in the constraints of the field. It lies in the complicity between two states of the social... between the history objectified in the form of structures and mechanisms (those of the social space or of the fields) and the history incarnated in bodies in the form of habitus...

The notion of field can be developed even further by considering the analogy to gravitational field in more detail. As argued by Lieberson (1985, 103), measuring variation in falling objects without invoking a theory of gravity – the invisible force which explains variation – will produce only naïve and probably fallible results. Experimentation in natural science – which is often taken as a role model for quantitative methods in social sciences – not only relies on the ability to isolate weight, surface, wind etc., but also on an understanding of

force as not emanating from ‘isolated variables’, but from the field of gravity, simultaneously structuring and structured by the moving objects. Hence the particular field theoretical take on the classic structure/agency problem in social science reflects a similar problem in natural science: In classical physics too, everything in the system is a part of the system itself (the object in a gravitational field contributes to the field itself). Before measuring effects, we would suggest that social scientists ask themselves whether they understand the *system* in which their measurements occur. If they do not, then from a CCT perspective it would be more profitable to have statistics contributing to the description of it, rather than rushing to isolated effects. Bourdieu (1996a) attempted this in analyzing the social field of elite educational institutions in France.

‘Capital’ was employed by Bourdieu to illuminate the links between the system (relational ‘capital structures’) and the agents (individual ‘capital positions’ or attributes). Agents in different positions pursue different capital investment and reconversion strategies, contributing to the overall tendency of the system to reproduce itself in relational terms. If educational outcomes are explained only by variation in isolated ‘independent’ variables, there is no footing for understanding why the educational system does not move toward perfect equality since we would simply need to provide low achievers with the right resources for this to happen. But this would completely miss an important logic of the educational system, namely relational stratification. If low achievers actually improved and everybody started getting the same grades, the scale would probably be moved up for variation in outcomes to be made possible again. Moreover, high achievers would do what they could to defend their relative position, inventing new strategies of educational distinction (for an empirical case of this, see

Munk 2009). This is why from a CCT perspective we find it more profitable to think in terms of relational capital positions in a field of latent and stably reproducing forces: If parents in some specific position have children, even in the absence of variation in ‘independent variables’, these children are likely to grow up, go to school and end up in a social position not unlike that of their parents.

This notion of field lends further theoretical support to our critique of the ‘cultural mobility theory’: The stronger effects of isolated independent variables in the case of low-SES students are the result of their deprived position in the educational field which will rarely be countered decisively even by large accumulations of isolated effects. For the same reason, isolated effects of various ‘cultural’ variables, such as extracurricular activities and pre-school education, tend to be lower for high-SES students precisely because everything in their lives is already inscribed in the logic of the field, making them benefit strongly from structural effects but little from isolated ones. This is exactly what a sound analysis would require when accounting for ‘isolated effects’.

#### Field theory as an analytical approach

As noted by Fligstein and McAdam (2012) and others, and as practiced by Bourdieu too, field theory involves a certain methodological pluralism. Scholars have long contributed to a structural differentiation of the sociological field into quantitative, qualitative, historico-institutional, and theoretical branches as a pretext for ‘focusing’ their research on particular aspects that could be synthesized. Without setting out a once-and-for-all scheme, we propose a three-step approach where quantitative analysis seems primarily qualified for contributing to our

understanding of the *overall* structures, whereas qualitative research seems more qualified for analyzing concerns, meanings, and concrete unfolding of field structure in institutionalized interaction of *specific* positions, and theoretical and historical research needed especially for their integration. Of course, a single study will seldom be able to encompass all relevant aspects of the ‘big picture’, but for sociology as a collective scientific endeavor, we would suggest such encompassment as a target point. This proposal contrasts the widespread idea among many quantitative and mixed methods scholars that qualitative research is primarily ‘hypothesis generating’ and quantitative research ‘hypothesis testing’. In some of Bourdieu’s (1984; 1996a) major studies, qualitative analyses plays an important role in integrating states of affairs (notably structures) with social processes (notably practices), hence enlightening the interplay between structures and agency of individuals, groups, and institutions. However, in many of the referred CCT quantitative studies there is primarily a focus on states of affairs rather than social processes, notably of practices. Pendulation between states and processes is probably fundamental to social science, but isolationist quantitative research tends to prioritize the former, either by measuring differences in states – such as cultural capital possessions – between individuals in cross-sectional designs, or in states for the same individuals across time in longitudinal designs. Mixed method designs following the CCT scheme would not simply flavor quantitative results with qualitative observations, but seek to advance an integrated analysis of states and processes. With time, this would also enable researchers to specify quantitative items and procedures more revealing of processes. However, this will require that such items are not considered in isolation.

The present use of sociology, in which enormous resources are used in assessing the *overall* effect of not only *specific* but even *minor* variables such as ‘books in the home’ and ‘high-status culture participation’, relies on a problematic understanding of the character of the social and the strengths of statistics in social science. This does not mean an abandonment of measuring books in the home and high-status culture participation. It means that these are not primarily generators of isolated effects. At least one could specify whether books at home are read and discussed with the children of the household, and information about the types of books would probably enhance our understand of the micro-processes in the families, always in comparison across groups (see also Munk 2013).

One inevitable consequence of the field theoretical approach is *starting out with a display of overall structures of the field*. Such a display can be done based on educational outcomes, possibly taken in relation to socioeconomic, sociogeographical, and sociopolitical background. It may seem counter-intuitive to start out with outcomes, but statistics are always post-factum and in a sense the explanans is *always* deduced from the explanandum in statistics. But rather than assuming that a social structure of unequal outcomes has somehow emerged from isolated individuals with different traits starting to interact, in field theory it is more appropriate to think of individuals as being positioned in social structures from the outset and as being affected by these structures in various ways depending on life trajectories in the field structures. In natural science, gravity cannot be conceptualized by departing from an empty space with a set of isolated objects in it; one has to assume from the outset that space is exactly a field of relational forces between the objects. Likewise, field theory in sociology cannot develop an image of the social from a purely individualistic vision. This is contrary to the analytical

sequence departing from individuals and ending with society and social structures – as exemplified by James Coleman’s (1990) famous ‘boat’ proposing the development of theoretical analysis of ‘macro’ (structural) phenomena from a theory of ‘micro’ (individual) interaction. The ‘social’ is not best understood as an emergent effect of individual interaction. Rather, individuals are thrown into the social and are oriented by their positions in it from the outset. Therefore, we suggest starting out with a descriptive account and analysis of relational social positions as a way of assessing structures. Why not attempt to *draw* the system of structural forces?

From this point on, we suggest that an analysis of the formal characteristics underlying the structure is pursued: How is the structure legally arranged? What are the requirements and the principles of evaluation of students, families, teachers, and schools? For instance, what are the principles underlying grading? What are the formal and informal social, cultural, and financial requirements related to various schools? This would provide a thorough fundament for relating structures to the individual level of analysis: What are the capitals needed and invested? What are the stakes and the risks, and what are the concerns of various social positions (individuals, families, races, genders, classes)? How are positions related to one another in terms of concerns and how do they interact in reproducing the social structures, institutions, and outcomes over time (e.g. between multiple generations)? In fact, as we have already pointed to in our discussion of existing studies, the institutional dimension is as important as that of individuals. For instance, Bourdieu (1996a) combines the analysis of individual field positions with those of schools, providing him with a framework for linking the level of students with the level of institutions. Hence, the field approach also provides a way of integrating questions of

school cultures, ratings, neighborhoods, and related institutional dimensions into the CCT framework.

Whereas the philosophy of Coleman's boat and related methodologies starts out by isolating individuals in order to 'rebuild' macro phenomena – be it analytically or by  $\beta$ 's in regression analysis – the three-step approach proposed in this paper (p. 18-19) departs from the aggregate picture and 'descends' to the individual level. However, by focusing in the last step on resources, risks, and reproduction, a connection is made back to the level of social structures, hence satisfying the double nature of capital (social structure and individual possession).

This three-step approach draws on suggestions by Bourdieu (1990a), but we do not necessarily imply the use of the qualitative and quantitative techniques he employed. For instance, Bowles and Gintis (2002, 4) display chances of child income across parental incomes, providing a more nuanced picture of economic inequality than simple linear (or even logit) regression coefficients will ever be able to. In a register data based study of five Norwegian cohorts, Andersen and Hansen (2011) show the importance of a detailed class scheme, not only vertical but also horizontal, notably distinguishing between economic and cultural positions, as Bourdieu did (see also Weeden and Grusky 2005; McIntosh and Munk 2009). Such a modeling is then ideally supplemented by insights into relevant institutions, policies, cultural and economic differences, and other aspects so as to 'sketch out' the most important structures needed to *explain and understand the statistical effects*. This can be pursued in many ways: Sewell and Shah (1968, 569) did so by close inspection of large cross tables; Bozick and DeLuca (2011) used latent class analysis techniques; Sullivan et al. (2010) used correspondence analysis; and Goldberg (2011) relational class analysis.

## CONCLUSION

The ambition of this article has been to bring fields out into the open and to argue that isolated effects are not stable attributes of social phenomena but emerge in systems of social relations. Studies of cultural capital and educational attainment based on regression analysis have tended to emphasize individual characteristics in explaining individual outcomes. This often happens since results are presented in tables with  $\beta$ 's of each variable in isolation and where the underlying formulas refer to individuals in isolation. Those social circumstances in which these effects occur have largely been reduced to mere matters of speech and common sense, rather than being themselves objects of inquiry intrinsic to the study of educational reproduction and choices.

Ideal CCT studies would design inquiry and interpret results in accordance with field theory, that is, relate the particular to the structural, which is exactly the opposite of isolating some phenomenon and estimating its effect on educational outcome. The very idea of 'effect' implies an idea of a field structure in which that effect occurs. Contrary to what is the case in natural science, contemporary quantitative research in educational attainment is not founded on an explicit theory of such a structure. There are, of course, important differences between natural and social sciences, but rather than criticizing the inability of statistics to capture the symbolic aspects, meaning producing and other distinctly social phenomena, we see the prime challenge for statistics at present in displaying and contributing to our understanding of such structures. Structural forces cannot be deciphered into an accumulation of isolated effects.

In our view, research in cultural capital implies an expanded focus not only concerned with the size of effects but also with *how* effects emerge and are strategically involved in the social struggle for intergenerational reproduction and mobility in society. We note that this also means that purely abstract theoretical attempts to determine once and for all the ‘under-theorized’ concepts of CCT (for instance, habitus into conscious and unconscious, cognitive and noncognitive, or collective and individual components) are not in themselves likely to shed new light on the role of capital in educational achievement. Such ‘substantialization too often ignores the fact that these concepts were made precisely to illustrate the relations between structures and agents, not to isolate an object by abstract definition. From a CCT perspective, it would be futile to attempt to define some social phenomena as field, others as capital, and yet others as habitus. Field, capital, and habitus are rather concepts that allow researchers to relate social phenomena and to analyze their multidimensional character.

At this point, we would like to stress certain normative implications of CCT. Curiously, many researchers are dismissive of mixing ‘is’ with ‘ought’, science with ethics. Conversely, they often stress that research should be applicable and serve as policy guidance. This explains why most studies in education focus on attainment, the prime political value diffused in the educational system (rather than, for instance, well-being, coping with lacking resources, etc.). By thus accepting the value system of the political elite, researchers implicitly take sides in a normative struggle for legitimacy. The idea of a field poses an important counterweight to the individualistic ontology and, eventually, normative ethics of ‘attainment’, and it allows the integration of analysis at the level of individuals with that of institutions. The ‘neutrality’ of statistics based on isolating effects and individuals is disputable, and that it is so

for the very same reasons that have been advanced in the case of its scientific insufficiencies. We do not accuse researchers of acting in bad faith, but by not properly acknowledging the system in which their research takes place, they risk passively contributing to its arrangement and even mechanisms of reproduction, rather than solving its problems. Talking about ‘cultural capital’ also implies an increased reflexivity on this question of the (normative) role of social science in the educational system.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> That is, before the translation of *Distinction* into English (Bourdieu 1984) and before the notion of field had been fully developed (notably in Bourdieu 1996a; 1996b).

<sup>2</sup> By tradition, we use the standard notions of ‘high’ and ‘low’ SES and education throughout this article. However, as will be evident from the argument, this terminology is strictly speaking problematic. ‘Short’ and ‘long’ education and ‘dominant’ and ‘dominated’ socioeconomic *positions* would be preferable alternatives.

<sup>3</sup> For a related critique of the social ontology of general linear regression models issued the same year, see Abbott (1988).

<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein, Munk (2009) has indicated that high-CC families mobilize and invest their cultural capital in new ways in order to stay ahead, either reducing or entirely canceling out the relative gain of low-SES investments.

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