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Cultural Capital Theory Revisited: Perspectives on Explanations of Educational Attainment*

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Cultural Capital Theory Revisited: Perspectives on Explanations of Educational Attainment

We argue that simplistic accounts of cultural capital theory are present in much contemporary research on educational attainment, are related to the dominating focus on regression analysis and individual traits, and are resulting in exclusion of related dimensions such as *habitus* and social space. We argue for the possibility of incorporating these aspects into the regression analysis framework with the adequate data and analytical perspective. In particular, we call for an increased focus on institutions (rather than just individuals) and *manières* (i.e. ‘ways of doing’, rather than just activities), but also that interpretation should be made in a broader perspective than the one taking isolated effects as answers in themselves. In adapting these recommendations, quantitative research should also seek to profit more from historical, institutional and theoretical research.

The concept of cultural capital is a cornerstone in Bourdieu’s theoretical and empirical work. However, the term has only reluctantly been defined by Bourdieu himself. For instance, in an important article (1986), he distinguished no less than three different forms: embodied (lasting dispositions in mind and body); objectified (possession of items); and institutionalized (certificates). Cultural capital is important in defining actors’ objective positions in social space related to the system of dispositions (*habitus*) and to symbolic power (cf. in particular Bourdieu 1984). This implies that, whatever definition of cultural capital one subscribes to, it cannot meaningfully be grasped outside its social, cultural and institutional embeddedness.¹ This is why no study of cultural capital and mechanisms of reproduction by Bourdieu relied solely on measures of one dimension such as a subgroup of individuals, say, students.²

Capital, dispositions and fields

Numerous studies have tried to adopt the concept of cultural capital. An important early attempt is found in DiMaggio (1982) who affirms its importance, although in other ways than proposed by Bourdieu and Passeron. DiMaggio, and many others following him (e.g. Teachman 1989; Katsillis and Rubinson 1990; Aschaffenburg and Maas 1997; De Graaf, De Graaf, Kraaykamp 2000), measured cultural capital as high-status culture participation *distinguished from* such measures as parents' education, intelligence, cultural interest etc. Such a simplification of operationalization has elaborately been criticized elsewhere (Lamont and Lareau 1988; Lareau and Weiniger 2004). Here, we are concerned with another problem in the adaption of cultural capital theory to sociology, namely the frequent compression of it into the strong methodological individualism that dominates the regression analysis tradition, but is inherently strange to cultural capital theory.

Studies based solely on regression analysis tend to emphasize individual characteristics in explaining individual outcomes. Accordingly, besides high-status culture participation, much discourse has been given on various notions of intelligence (e.g. Björklund, Erikson, and Jäntti, 2010), measures of parents' socioeconomic status and class (e.g. Sewell and Shah 1968; Sullivan 2001; Beller 2009), and educational resources in the home (e.g. Teachman 1987; Jæger 2009). However, the simultaneous account of the stratified and stratifying processes of 'accumulating labor' (cf. the definition of capital in Bourdieu 1986), and of culture, institutions, and *habitus*, so central to cultural capital theory of Bourdieu, remains underdeveloped. We are in no way arguing that regression analysis approaches to the individual should be abandoned. And empirical analysis should maintain a sharper focus on exactly what is being measured than is provided for by such a broad concept as cultural capital. But we think that those social circumstances in which the 'effects' of regression analysis occur have in general 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.

The purely individualistic focus is in fact in contrast to the *relational focus* so often accentuated by Bourdieu himself (see Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron 1991). Important concepts in cultural capital theory such as *strategies* (which are not necessarily to be taken intentionally, Bourdieu 1996, p. 272), *doxa* (i.e. everything that is ‘taken for granted’, Bourdieu 2000a), and *habitus* (‘the virtue made of necessity’, Bourdieu 1990b, p. 9; for discussions of the cognitive aspects of *habitus*, see Farkas 2003; Lizardo 2004; Nash 2005) are misconceived if taken in a narrowly individualistic sense. These concepts imply questions of how legitimate forms of knowledge and knowing, but also the finesses of ‘good manners’ in the educational system are defined and of parents’ and children’s striving to obtain the recognition implied in any such definitions (cf. Bourdieu 2000b, p. 166).

Towards a cultural capital perspective

The notion of cultural capital *theory* has led to some confusion because it is perceived with a narrow focus on assumptions and testable hypotheses at the individual level, thus possibly leaving out structures and institutional effects from empirical investigation. For instance, Goldthorpe (2007) holds that Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital is either wrong or uninteresting (for a critical examination of Goldthorpe’s argument, see Lizardo 2008). This, we believe, is not the case, but if one understands ‘theory’ in a ‘schematic and formal’ i.e. ‘approved sense of the word’ (Bourdieu 1986, note 4), then we will suggest that cultural capital should rather be termed an analytical than a theoretical concept. By this, we encourage an empirically integrated use of cultural capital that helps expand the analytical *perspective* that allows the investigation of individuals to include systematic investigation of settings too, and that stresses the importance of *ways of doing*, but does not in itself explain anything (see

Bourdieu 2000b, p. 61, for a similar invitation). ‘Analytical’ is simply an attempt to emphasize theory as a more complex apparatus rather than just as being based on tightly riveted assumptions. Thus, contrary to Goldthorpe, but also to Kingston (2001) who holds that cultural capital does not substantially account for academic success, that too many different variables have been labeled cultural capital, and that the very notion of ‘culture’ is likely to blur what actually determines educational success, we believe that the strength of cultural capital theory is first of all in its perspective that conceptually and empirically permits analysis of the structured construction and complex quality of the social circumstances, differences, and inequalities.

Now, as Kingston (2001) emphasizes, it is indeed well worth finding out whether it is possible to decipher the direct effect of parents’ education into more concrete indirect effects, and whether some of this effect is spurious. However, such efforts to reveal what is really ‘behind cultural capital’ should not *replace* those of mapping its character and role in social reproduction (and, we believe, in social mobility).³ Rather, research should *also* allow itself to proceed by means of concepts such as *habitus* to access *relational* dimensions. This should be taken as an invitation to enrichment of the widespread use of regression analysis by using aspects as institutional setting, youth culture, and legislation to more fully account for the *social context* (if not *social space*) in which individuals are embedded, and, as a consequence hereof, by not just broadly defined activities such as reading, but also by ways of doing ways of doing (what books, how, why), since this is fundamental to cultural capital theory. In *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu emphasizes not only different practices, but *ways of doing (manières)* too. What is important is not just going to museums, but *which* ones, *when*, experiencing *what*? Further, in a contemporary context, we may suggest that not only museums matter, but also television shows, radio, movies and music.

Further, research should pay attention to the vast societal changes since Bourdieu gathered most of his data in the 1960's: the rise of a youth and mass culture (that has to some extent turned beaux arts culture into 'snobbism', i.e. *delegitimized* it), the relative degradation of teachers' social status in some countries, transnational trajectories in elite education, the enormous rise in the general level of education (and strong political demands for even more), a new spirit of capitalism including a *cit  par projets* and the increasing subordination of humanities by economic concerns into industrial design, human resources, marketing etc. (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007). Inspiration for such a development can also be found in in-depth qualitative research such as Lareau's (e.g. 2003).

Evidently, cultural capital theory should not be a means to set forth obscure and hard-headed assertions about the educational system. Nor should it be a *carte blanche* to explain anything by generic concepts of culture (something Bourdieu has often erroneously been accused for doing, see Lizardo 2011). Rather, it should conceptually allow us to extend regression analysis of individual effects by analysis of the settings that generate them. Accounts of child characteristics should be simultaneous with accounts of not only parents, but also teachers, schools, legislation, (youth) culture etc. Such a use is very general, and should perhaps, in order to avoid confusion, rather be termed cultural capital *perspective* than *theory*, exactly because it relies on the analytical potentials of the concept in order to broaden the empirical and interpretative scope of research, rather than to procure ready-made explanations.

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Footnotes

¹ In *Reproduction*, for instance, the authors state that ‘it would be absurd to try to isolate the influence of any one factor, or, a fortiori, to credit it with a uniform, univocal influence at the different moments of the process or in the different structures of factors.’ (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, p. 87). A similar argument is found in the first chapter of *Distinction* (1984).

² In his foreword to the second edition of *Reproduction* (1990a, p. vii), Bourdieu complains about the simplistic, albeit wide, reception of this book. Certain critics, he claims, thrust upon the book an ‘extraordinary simplification – if not outright distortion – of the scientific thesis it propounded and of the empirical inquiries it contained’. For instance, a preliminary study to *Reproduction* used an ethnomethodological approach to map the classroom construction of understanding between teachers and different children (see Bourdieu, Passeron and de Saint Martin 1965). *Homo Academicus* (1988) included comprehensive analysis of not only students, but also professors. And *The State Nobility* (1996) relied on a mapping of different elite institutions in the educational system.

³ Bourdieu (2000b, p. 165), discussing the process of transformation that shapes a person, notes that: ‘... it is never possible ... to determine who, the agent or the institution, really choose; whether it is the good pupil who chooses the school or the school that chooses him, because everything in his *docile* behavior shows that he chooses it.’