

## Cultural Capital

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The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, working with various colleagues, developed the concept of cultural capital in the early 1960s in order to help address a particular empirical problem—namely, the fact that “[e]conomic obstacles are not sufficient to explain” disparities in the educational attainment of children from different social classes (Bourdieu & Passeron 1979 [1964], 8). Bourdieu argued that, above and beyond economic factors, “cultural habits and...dispositions inherited from” the family are fundamentally important to school success (Bourdieu & Passeron 1979 [1964],14). In doing so, he broke sharply with traditional sociological conceptions of culture, which tended to view it primarily as a source of shared norms and values, or as a vehicle of collective expression. Instead, Bourdieu maintained that culture shares many of the properties that are characteristic of economic capital. In particular, he asserted that cultural “habits and dispositions” comprise a *resource* capable of generating “profits”; they are potentially subject to *monopolization* by individuals and groups; and, under appropriate conditions, they can be *transmitted* from one generation to the next (Lareau and Weininger 2003).

As the originator of the concept of cultural capital, Bourdieu was notoriously disinclined to elaborate the meaning and significance of concepts outside of the concrete context offered by empirical research. At the most general level, however, he emphasized that any “competence” becomes a capital insofar as it facilitates of appropriation a society’s “cultural heritage” but is unequally distributed, thereby creating opportunities for “exclusive advantages”. In societies characterized by a highly differentiated social structure and a system of formal education, Bourdieu further asserted, these “advantages” largely stem from the institutionalization of “criteria of evaluation” in schools—that is, standards of assessment—which are favorable to children from a particular class or classes (Bourdieu 1977).

Bourdieu further argued that cultural capital exists in three distinct forms (1986). In its “embodied” form, cultural capital is a “competence” or skill that cannot be separated from its “bearer” (that is, the person who “holds” it). As such, the acquisition of cultural capital necessarily presupposes the investment of time devoted to learning and/or training. For example, a college student who studies art history has gained a competence which, because it is highly valued in some institutional settings, becomes an embodied form of cultural capital. Additionally, Bourdieu suggests that the objects themselves may function as a form of cultural capital, insofar as their use or consumption presupposes a certain amount of embodied cultural capital. For example, a philosophy text is an “objectified” form of cultural capital since it requires prior training in philosophy to understand. Finally, in societies with a system of formal education, cultural capital exists in an “institutionalized” form. This is to say that when the

school certifies individuals' competencies and skills by issuing credentials, their embodied cultural capital takes on an objective value. Thus, for example, since persons with the same credentials have a roughly equivalent worth on the labor market, educational degrees can be seen to be a distinct form of cultural capital. Because they render individuals interchangeable in this fashion, Bourdieu suggests that institutionalization performs a function for cultural capital analogous to that performed by money in the case of economic capital.

Nevertheless, despite the similarities between cultural and economic capital, Bourdieu also recognized that they differ from one another in important respects. In particular, he noted that the legitimation of inequality in cultural capital occurs in a manner that is highly distinct from the legitimation of economic inequality. Despite the fact that cultural capital is acquired in the home and the school via exposure to a given set of cultural practices—and therefore has a social origin—it is liable to be perceived as inborn “talent,” and its holder “gifted,” as a result of the fact that it is embodied in particular individuals. Moreover, because the school system transforms “inherited” cultural capital into “scholastic” cultural capital, the latter is predisposed to appear as an individual “achievement.” For example, scholars have demonstrated that middle-class parents typically talk more to infants and young children than do working-class or poor parents. As a result, middle-class children often have larger vocabularies when they enter school, and subsequently score more highly on standardized tests measuring verbal skills (Hart and Risley 1999; Lareau 2003). Nevertheless, teachers, parents, and students themselves are likely to interpret the differences in test scores as a matter of natural talent or individual effort.

Bourdieu's arguments concerning cultural capital were notable because they vociferously challenged the widespread view of modern schooling as a mobility engine that promotes or demotes people through the class structure simply on the basis of their talents and efforts. Indeed, from Bourdieu's highly critical vantage point, modern systems of schooling are far more adept at validating and augmenting cultural capital inherited from the family than they are at instilling it in children who enter the institution with few or none of the requisite dispositions and skills. Consequently, he maintained, the educational systems of modern societies tend to channel individuals towards class destinations that largely (but not wholly) mirror their class origins. Moreover, they tend to elicit acceptance of this outcome (i.e. legitimation), both from those who are most privileged by it and those who are disfavored by it (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977 [1970]).

The concept of cultural capital also had tremendous impact in sociology because it placed culture at the core of stratification research. Bourdieu's subsequent work used the notion of cultural capital to further reinforce the premise that culture is directly implicated in social inequality. This is especially apparent in the thoroughgoing re-conceptualization of social class that he presented in *Distinction* (1984 [1979]; Weininger 2005). For Bourdieu, classes are differentiated from one another in terms of the overall *volume of capital* (economic plus cultural) controlled by individuals or families. Within classes, “class fractions” are differentiated from one another by the *composition* of the capital controlled—or in other words, by the ratio of economic capital to cultural capital. Using this re-conceptualization, *Distinction* analyzed the aesthetic practices and preferences of classes and class fractions located across the French social structure, focusing, in particular, on the taste or distaste for “highbrow” art forms (painting, music, literature, drama, etc.). Bourdieu's data indicated that each class (and class fraction) exhibited a relatively unique pattern of tastes, one consistent with its particular mix of cultural and economic capital. Thus, for example, professors and artistic producers—one fraction of the dominant class—utilized their superior endowment of cultural capital to appreciate the most avant-garde forms as art. By contrast, employers, the fraction of the dominant class richest in

economic capital, tended to prefer less intellectually demanding forms of art, and especially those which conformed to traditional conceptions of beauty, and which connoted a sense of luxury. These differences of taste, Bourdieu argued, should be viewed as claims for the prestige constitutive of status, in Weber's sense of "social honor," which Bourdieu termed "symbolic capital." As such, these differences were said to play an integral role in the legitimation of class stratification.

Within English-language sociology, the concept of cultural capital began to make its way into the literature starting in the late 1970s with the translation of *Reproduction*. Given its genesis in Bourdieu's study of the French educational system, it has unsurprisingly been in the field of educational research that the notion of cultural capital has triggered the greatest amount of empirical research and theoretical reflection, and the greatest contention. [See cultural capital in schools.] However, the concept has proven fruitful in a number of other research areas. For example, proceeding from Bourdieu's interest in the way that different forms of capital are implicated in complex patterns of stratification, Eyal, Szelényi, and Townsley's (1998) examination of the class structure of post-communist societies in Central Europe focuses on cultural capital. Contrary to many predictions, they argue, members of the bureaucratic *nomenklatura* did not successfully exploit their authority under communism to appropriate large amounts state property during the privatization process that marked the transition to capitalism. Nor have the small-scale entrepreneurs who were tolerated in the final decades of state socialism managed to leverage their "head start" and become a full-blown capitalist class in the post-1989 period. Rather, in countries such as Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland, a stratification system has emerged which can be characterized as a type of "capitalism without capitalists." In this system, cultural capital stands as the most important basis of power and privilege. Thus, the dominant class in these societies can be described as a "cultural bourgeoisie" rather than an economic bourgeoisie. This cultural bourgeoisie, which is a diverse group that includes former technocrats and dissident intellectuals, has largely monopolized the skills, know-how, and credentials (i.e., cultural capital) that have become critical to occupational success. The authors demonstrate that possession of cultural capital makes possible access to leading positions in the economy and the state and, conversely, that lack of cultural capital is a substantial barrier

The concept of cultural capital has also proven highly productive in the study of aesthetic tastes and preferences. In this context, sociologists have evaluated the association between social position and taste, concentrating on the upper class predilection for exclusively "highbrow" aesthetic forms at the heart of *Distinction*. The evidence for this proposition strongly indicates that in the contemporary United States, for example, the relation is different from that charted by Bourdieu. Thus, Peterson and colleagues (Peterson and Kern 1996; Peterson and Simkus 1992) report that in matters of cultural taste, "elites" in the U.S. are more accurately characterized as "omnivores" than "snobs": status claims now tend to hinge on familiarity with a wide variety of genres within each cultural form (music, literature, film, etc.)—genres that range from the highbrow (e.g. classical music and opera) to the middlebrow (e.g. Broadway show tunes) and the lowbrow (e.g. country music and rock). Those claiming status are expected to be able to distinguish laudable examples of each genre according to standards of judgement that are unique to it. Despite the fact that it differs substantially from the form of aesthetic competence delineated in Bourdieu's account of French lifestyles, this "cosmopolitan" orientation is clearly conditional upon indicators of social class such as education, and therefore prone to function as a form of cultural capital. Indeed, Bryson (1992) goes so far as to dub it "multi-cultural capital."

At the same time that it has been incorporated into various areas of English-language sociology, the concept of cultural capital has also been the object of considerable criticism. Giroux (1983) has argued, for example, that when culture is viewed primarily as a form of capital, it becomes impossible to acknowledge the role it plays in enabling those in subordinate positions to resist domination. Similarly, Lamont (1992) asserts that conceptualizing culture in this manner prevents sociologists from recognizing that it contains repertoires which actors use to evaluate the moral quality of their own experiences and those of others—repertoires that do not necessarily have the character of a resource implicated in stratification processes. These debates are sure to intensify as scholars continue to debate the relation between culture and inequality. Regardless of the shape that they take, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, with its distinctive focus on the social value of cultural habits, dispositions, and skills, is likely to be an important part of the discussions in theories of inequality, the sociology of culture, and the sociology of education in the future.

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### **Cross-References**

Bourdieu, Pierre

Class, Perceptions of

Cultural Capital in Schools

Capital: Economic, Cultural, and Social

Distinction

Life Chance and Resources

Stratification and Distinction

Stratification and Inequality, Theories of

Symbolic Classification (w/ special emphasis on Durkheim and Mauss)