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Cultural Capital

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Abstract

Cultural capital is a rich concept to explore the workings of culture in patterns of social differentiation. It was developed by Bourdieu in the mid-1960s, in the context of investigations of what, beyond economic assets, was needed to explain educational attainment. The chief finding was that dispositions inherited from family are fundamental to school success. As standards of assessment favour higher classes, better off children perform higher. Educational studies and cultural policies to mitigate class reproduction effects have applied the concept. It has also been salient in social stratification research and feminist theory. Recent explorations show the need to attend to various forms of cultural capital evident in contemporary social life. The key argument is that there is no absolute standard of cultural value on which cultural capital is based, its value being defined according to dynamically changing, and contested, hierarchies which shape the concept as context dependent and relational.

Main text

Cultural capital is a key concept in investigations of social inequalities, enabling links to be made between cultural processes and the generation, reproduction and contestation of social divisions. The concept identifies culture as an appropriate form of investment that can secure a return, in the form of an accumulating advantage bearing on social position. It is transmitted in social upbringing via family and the educational system.

The concept of cultural capital was originated by Pierre Bourdieu in the early 1960s, in collaboration with Jean-Claude Passeron (1964, 1979). In social theory culture was until then seen as a vehicle of collective expression, norms and values. Bourdieu had no interest in cultures by themselves, but he was interested in how culture is deployed by individuals in relation to positions in social space. Bourdieu's intervention broke fundamentally with early conceptions of culture to argue that it operates in the same way as economic capital. A simple way of putting Bourdieu's claim about the significance of cultural capital is that there is a powerful divide between 'high' culture (or legitimate, establishment, elite) and popular culture.

Bourdieu uses the language of economics to investigate cultural exchanges. Capital has value in exchange, but its potential to accumulate and be converted is different in various fields. Cultural capital is part of a set of three different types of capitals: economic capital refers to income, wages and any source of financial resource; social capital derives from the stock of social relations and acquaintances accumulated over a life trajectory and the derived status and prestige attached to these; cultural capital derives from credentials accumulated through trajectory within the formal educational system and the intellectual and cultural

dispositions, competences and tastes incorporated through socialization within the family, community or social class to which the individual belongs (Bourdieu, 1984).

Cultural capital appears in three forms in the work of Bourdieu. It is embodied, as it is held by a person, and cannot be separated from the bearer. In this form it refers to investment in learning, training, including manners, connections, qualifications and habits of living. It is objectified, as values of the social world are translated into consumption, evident in modes of dress, symbolic commodities, styles of architecture, for example. It is institutionalised, in the nation-state, in formal educational system or apprenticeship and training, or in the market, where norms for recognition of symbols, status, and financial advantage are reproduced.

The three forms of cultural capital go together. The certification of an embodied competence embedded in an institutional apparatus has an objectified value. For example, this is the case with educational degrees; or educational degrees from equivalent valued institutions; held by individuals deemed of equal worth.

In line with Bourdieu's conception of theory as pragmatic, the meaning and significance of cultural capital has been unravelled in the context of empirical explorations. Important areas are education, cultural policy, stratification and feminist theory.

In studies of education it has been highly influential. This is a consequence of early deployment of the notion, appearing as an empirical need to respond to disparities in educational attainment of children from different social classes (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979). The argument driving the exploration was that more than economic assets were needed to explain success; the chief finding being that dispositions inherited from family are fundamental to school success. In the education system these assets of origin are advantageous because standards of assessment favour the higher classes. Therefore, class destination is predicated and reinforced through the educational system, which validates and augments pupils and students original inherited cultural capital. This outcome is highly accepted - legitimised - through a process of misrecognition, whereby the attribution of value to person and things – often based on competition and rarity – appears as inscribed in the nature of the person or things (Bourdieu, 1977:183).

Attempts to translate the concept of cultural capital into practical policy implementations have been found in cultural policy fields, where the facilitation of access to publicly funded forms of culture, especially those coded as high culture, have been focused as a matter of democratic civil entitlement to promote social mobility. Yet, while cultural capital theory has had an important impact on studies in the field, it has had limited effects in terms of actual implementation of related cultural policies (Dubois 2011; Bennett and Silva, 2011).

In social stratification research the concept of cultural capital has been increasingly relevant; with a number of prominent studies ([Bennett et al. 1999](#); [Lamont 1992](#); [Rosenlund 2000](#); [Bennett et al. 2009](#)) extending Bourdieu's study of *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1984), where the concept is extensively explored to show that culture is implicated in social inequality on a wider scale. Analysing the aesthetic practices and preferences of individuals classified into different class fractions and groups Bourdieu explored how taste classifies. Patterns of taste in the fields of painting, music, literature, drama, food and others, show consistent match with volumes of different types of capital. Groups rich in cultural capital and poor in economic capital were higher education teachers, artistic producers and cultural intermediaries. Poor in cultural capital and rich in economic capital were industrialist and

commercial employers. Differences of taste – likes and dislikes – placed individuals and things in close proximity, or at a distance, in social space, legitimating the class stratification.

National studies in Australia (Bennett et al. 2001), Great Britain (Bennett et al. 2009), Denmark (Priour et al. 2008), Serbia (Cveticanin, 2012) and Finland (~~xxxx~~Kahama and Toikka 2012; Purhonen and Wright 2013, ~~xxxx~~) have been carried out in later years to explore if the connections Bourdieu found in late 1960s France would apply elsewhere. The key concerns have addressed the connections between class and culture, the centrality of legitimate culture, the power of cultural competence, the effects of political regimes, the influences on class relations of the newer developments in broadcast and the internet, and the relevance of social divisions other than class (like age, gender, ethnicity) in shaping differences in cultural tastes and practices.

These nation-wide studies and others on aesthetics of elites or particular groups have challenged the concept of cultural capital and have opened up ~~ing~~ new debates. A prominent one is the omnivore thesis, arguing that in contemporary western societies divisions between high and popular culture was dissolving as better off groups were found to have a taste for everything, not being averse to participate in a wide range (Peterson 1992; Peterson and Simkus, 1992). Yet, further explorations found evidence that wider tastes were added to the distinction of command of consecrated culture, making an omnivorous orientation socially profitable (Warde et al., 2007, Ollivier 2008).

Feminist theory has critically examined the cultural capital concept in the context of Bourdieu's work (Adkins and Skeggs 2004). It is argued that, although the role of women as mothers and homemakers is crucial to the process of individual development and its associated social positions, Bourdieu defines social origin as deriving from the father. A renewed theory of cultural capital is proposed arguing that cultural capital is a relational resource (not simply an individual one) that needs to be explored in the context of gender relations in contemporary society (Silva 2005) to account for general patterns of inequality and classed femininity (Skeggs 1997) and motherhood (Lawler 2000).

Criticisms and appropriations of the concept of cultural capital have been revealed in continuing interrogation of relations between inequality and culture. As investigations probe the social value of habits, dispositions, skills, knowledge, and possessions in various contexts and in relation to the significance of social divisions of various kinds, attention to additional forms of cultural capital have been called for. These include technical, affective (or emotional), national, subcultural forms of cultural capital (Bennett et al. 2009: 258), as well as its imprints in questions of spatiality, in particular as these refer to relations between, and orientations of, international, national or locally orientated cultural forms and practices (Priour and Savage 2011).

The rich trajectory of the concept of cultural capital, the multiple debates and uses it has been put to, show that there is no absolute standard of cultural value on which cultural capital is based, its value being defined according to dynamically changing, and contested, hierarchies which shape the concept as context dependent and relational.

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See Also

Other entries on homepage of Scholar One – I am unable to do this before submission date.

Further Reading

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