Bourdieu and Education: How Useful is Bourdieu's Theory for Researchers?

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Abstract

Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction has been highly influential within the sociology of education. This paper will provide a critical introduction to Bourdieu's theory regarding the cultural reproduction of educational advantage, and an overview of the empirical literature on cultural reproduction. It will be argued that the 'grand theory' of cultural reproduction is unhelpful. On the other hand, the concept of cultural capital, though ill-defined, has proved useful for empirical researchers.

1 Introduction

Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction has been highly influential, and has generated a great deal of literature, both theoretical and empirical. This paper will examine the theory and the use empirical researchers in the fields of education and stratification have made of it. Bourdieu's work must be seen in the context both of the debate on class inequalities in educational attainment and of broader questions of class reproduction in advanced capitalist societies. The theory of cultural reproduction is concerned with the link between original class membership and ultimate class membership, and how this link is mediated by the education system.

According to Bourdieu, the education systems of industrialised societies function in such a way as to legitimate class inequalities. Success in the education system is facilitated by the possession of cultural capital and of higher-class habitus. Lower-class pupils do not in general possess these traits, so the failure of the majority of these pupils is inevitable. This explains class inequalities in educational attainment. However, success and failure in the education system is seen as being due to individual gifts (or the lack of them). Therefore, for Bourdieu, educational credentials help to reproduce and legitimate social inequalities, as higher-class individuals are seen to deserve their place in the social structure.

The first part of this paper will consist of a general discussion of Bourdieu's theory of education, with particular reference to the concepts of cultural capital and habitus. I will argue that the concept of habitus is theoretically incoherent and has no clear use for empirical researchers. The concept of cultural capital, on the other hand, while not constructed particularly clearly by Bourdieu, is substantive enough to be potentially useful to empirical researchers. The second section of this paper will therefore assess

some of the empirical work concerning cultural capital and the problems involved in operationalising the concept.

2 Bourdieu's Theory

2.1 Cultural Capital

2.1.1 Introduction to Cultural Capital

Bourdieu states that cultural capital consists of familiarity with the dominant culture in a society, and especially the ability to understand and use 'educated' language. The possession of cultural capital varies with social class, yet the education system assumes the possession of cultural capital. This makes it very difficult for lower-class pupils to succeed in the education system.

> "By doing away with giving explicitly to everyone what it implicitly demands of everyone, the education system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give. This consists mainly of linguistic and cultural competence and that relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture." (Bourdieu, 1977a, p. 494)

Bourdieu claims that, since the education system presupposes the possession of cultural capital, which few students in fact possess, there is a great deal of inefficiency in 'pedagogic transmission' (i.e. teaching). This is because students simply do not understand what their teachers are trying to get across. For Bourdieu, this is particularly apparent in the universities, where students, afraid of revealing the extent of their ignorance

"...minimize the risks by throwing a smoke-screen of vagueness over the possibility of truth or error." (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990, p. 114)

But despite the fact that lower-class pupils are seriously disadvantaged in the competition for educational credentials, the results of this competition are seen as meritocratic and therefore as legitimate. In addition, Bourdieu claims that social inequalities are legitimated by the educational credentials held by those in dominant positions. This means that the education system has a key role in maintaining the status quo.

> "...it [education] is in fact one of the most effective means of perpetuating the existing social pattern, as it both provides an apparent justification for social inequalities and gives recognition to the cultural heritage, that is, to a *social* gift treated as a *natural* one." (Bourdieu, 1974, p. 32)

In sum, Bourdieu's view is that cultural capital is inculcated in the higher-class home, and enables higher-class students to gain higher educational credentials than lower-class students. This enables higher-class individuals to maintain their class position, and legitimates the dominant position which higher-class individuals typically goes on to hold. Of course, *some* lower-class individuals will succeed in the education system, but, rather than challenging the system, this will strengthen it by contributing to the appearance of meritocracy.

Bourdieu can be criticised for not being precise enough about exactly which of the resources associated with the higher-class home constitute cultural capital, and how these resources are converted into educational credentials. However, Bourdieu's emphasis on the non-material resources possessed by the higher-class household is to be welcomed. We have evidence that the

dramatic fall in the material costs to families of education due to educational reforms, such as the universal provision of free and compulsory secondary education, have not diminished the degree of association between class origins and educational attainment (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993; Halsey et al., 1980). This suggests that the educational advantage which higher-class parents pass on to their children may not be entirely caused by economic factors, and that the notion of cultural capital is therefore worthy of serious attention.

2.1.2 Cultural Capital vs. Other Forms of Capital

The strength of the link that Bourdieu suggests between cultural capital, educational credentials and occupational positions may be questioned, as in fact, the correspondence between cultural capital end educational credentials as well as the correspondence between educational credentials and elite occupational positions is far from complete. It may be that one has to see the strength of Bourdieu's claim in the light of the French context, where there is a distinctive link between the *grandes écoles* and high positions in the professions and government administration. Even given this proviso, though, one must acknowledge that key powerful positions, in business for example, are not allocated primarily acording to educational credentials. So, it is unsurprising that Bourdieu has been accused of giving too much weight to symbolic relations at the expense of material ones (Willis, 1983). Yet Bourdieu refers to economic capital and social capital (social relationships and networks) as well as symbolic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 230). It is difficult to assess how important Bourdieu thinks cultural capital is in relation to other forms of capital, as he is characteristically unclear on this point.

> "Apart from the fact that the increase in the proportion of holders of the most prestigious academic qualifications among the ruling classes may mean only the need to call upon academic approval in order to legitimate the transmission of power and privileges is being more and more felt, the effect is as though the cultural and educational mechanisms had merely strengthened or taken over from the traditional mechanisms such as the hereditary transmissions of economic capital, of a name or of capital in terms of social relationships..." (Bourdieu, 1977a, p. 496)

Have cultural and educational mechanisms "merely strengthened" traditional mechanisms or reproduction or have they "taken over from" such traditional mechanisms? Bourdieu slides from the former to the latter claim as if there were not much to choose between them. And as if that was not vague enough, Bourdieu is not actually claiming to describe reality, but uses the non-comittal phrase "the effect is as though". (Such evasive phrases form part of many of Bourdieu's sentences). In fact, (the first part of the sentence implies) educational credentials may not be necessary to secure privileges at all, but only to legitimate them. In short this passage ,along with others in a similar vein, is quite incoherent. We are left with no clear idea of Bourdieu's view of the importance of cultural and educational capital in the transmission of privileges. At times Bourdieu stresses the role of educational credentials in social reproduction, while at other times the value of educational credentials is downplayed "...since academic qualifications are a weak currency and possess all their value only within the limits of the academic market." (Bourdieu, 1977a, p. 507)

For cultural capital to be an important mechanism of social reproduction it must be the case, not just that cultural capital facilitates the acquisition of educational credentials, but that educational credentials are an important mechanism through which wealth and power are transmitted. Bourdieu focuses on the first of these relationships at the expense of the latter, and this may account for the ambiguity in his views on the subject.

2.1.3 The Cultural Arbitrary

In addition to cultural capital, Bourdieu introduces the supplementary concept of the cultural arbitrary, which poses an additional obstacle to lower-class educational attainment. Bourdieu does not define the concept of the cultural arbitrary. However, he states that:

> "In any given social formation the legitimate PA [1], i.e. the PA endowed with the dominant legitimacy, is nothing other than the arbitrary imposition of the dominant cultural arbitrary insofar as it is misrecognized in its objective truth as the dominant PA and the imposition of the dominant culture..." (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990, p. 22)

Since Bourdieu uses the term 'cultural arbitrary' without defining it, it is not clear precisely what he means when referring to arbitrariness, or to what extent he sees the cultural skills demanded and transmitted by the education system as arbitrary.

In some cases, the educational standards described by Bourdieu are clearly in some sense arbitrary. For instance Bourdieu claims that lower-class students who achieve a degree of academic success by dint of hard

[1] Pedagogic Action

work, face the obstacle that their achievement may be deemed to be too hard won, and not natural enough. In the education system:

> "...application becomes pedantry and a respect for hard work grinding, limited pettiness, with the implication that it is intended to compensate for lack of natural talents." (Bourdieu, 1974, p. 59)

This aristocratic disdain for lower-class attempts to appropriate higher-class culture leads to a peculiar set of values in higher education. Namely:

> "...a tendency to prefer eloquence to truth, style to content." (Bourdieu, 1967, p. 335)

Bourdieu backs up this claim by reference to university examination reports (Bourdieu and Saint-Martin, 1974). He claims that the criteria of university examiners reflect the values of the dominant classes, and that the more vague the demands of the examiners are, the less chance lower-class pupils will have of adhering to these demands.

These comments on the theme of academic values are highly plausible. But one must ask how important the cultural arbitrary is in contributing to class inequalities in educational attainment. Although Bourdieu's argument is rather compelling in relation to the evaluation of work in the arts and humanities departments of universities, it does not have the same force when applied to the sciences or to primary and secondary schools. The national exams taken by school children in many nations are *largely* examined using clear and explicit criteria (although no doubt subjective judgements are a factor in determining students' results). This problem reflects a general tendency of Bourdieu's to focus on universities rather than on schools. This can only detract from his arguments since it means that Bourdieu is dealing

with a population from which the lower-classes have already been largely eliminated.

Bourdieu does not appear to see every element of the cultural capital transmitted in the home and the education transmitted in the school as arbitrary. So, how do we decide which educational values and practices are arbitrary, and which valid?

> "The sociological theory of PA distinguishes between the arbitrariness of the imposition and the arbitrariness of the content imposed, only so as to bring out the sociological implications of the relationship between two logical fictions, namely a pure power relationship as the objective truth of the imposition and a totally arbitrary culture as the objective truth of the meanings imposed... There is no PA which does not inculcate some meanings not deducible from a universal principle (logical reason or biological nature...)" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990, p. 9–10)

In relation to the content of teaching, "arbitrariness" is opposed to "objective truth" and "meanings deducible from a universal principle". This is confusing, since "objective truth" and "meanings deducible from a universal principle" are not the same thing. If anything which is not objectively true is therefore "arbitrary", does this mean that subjects in which we can never be confident of objective truth are always utterly arbitrary? Or is the aim of truth enough to justify a discipline? What about subjects such as music or woodwork which do not aim at truth?

Bourdieu's notion of the "cultural arbitrary" is unclear. It is not possible to determine to what extent he is arguing that the dominant culture and the educational values that serve it are no better than any other culture.

Bourdieu gives some interesting examples of arbitrary values in education, but does not give a precise definition of what constitutes arbitrariness in this context. He does not make a clear enough distinction between those parts of the dominant culture which are in some way snobbish (i.e. exclusive for exclusivity's sake) and arbitrary, and those which are universally valuable but not universally accessible. Such a distinction is essential if we are to distinguish between those elements of the dominant culture which should be taught in schools, and those which should be removed from the curriculum. It seems clear that lower-class pupils would be disadvantaged by a lack of cultural resources even if the content of educational syllabuses and assessments were utterly rational. A sophisticated grasp of language alone would be a huge advantage in just about any conceivable education system. Given this, the cultural arbitrary should probably be relegated to a minor role in any explanatory theory of class inequalities in educational attainment.

2.2 Habitus

2.2.1 Introduction to Habitus

The notion of habitus is central to Bourdieu's thought, yet it is never clearly defined. I will try to elucidate the concept before going on to criticise it.

Like cultural capital, habitus is transmitted within the home. However, whereas cultural capital consists of the possession of legitimate knowledge, habitus is a set of attitudes and values, and the dominant habitus is a set of attitudes and values held by the dominant class. A major component of the dominant habitus is a positive attitude towards education.

> "... the system of dispositions towards the school, understood as a propensity to consent to the investments in time, effort and

> money necessary to conserve and to increase cultural capital." (Bourdieu, 1977a, p. 495)

So is habitus just a set of attitudes, directed primarily towards education and culture? Sometimes Bourdieu seems to suggest that the dominant habitus consists of more than this — that it includes (or at least gives rise to) competence in specific social settings, including for instance:

> "...the practice of the games and sports of high society or the manners and tastes resulting from good breeding..." (Bourdieu, 1977a, p. 506)

So what does Bourdieu mean by a "set of dispositions"? He gives various definitions, including a "tendency", "propensity" or "inclination" (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 214). Given the vagueness of this, it is not surprising that the concept of habitus is condemned as "ambiguous and overloaded" (Nash, 1990, p. 446). Although the concept is too nebulous to be operationalised, ethnographic researchers in the field of education have often made reference to habitus — see for example (Reay, 1995; Reay et al., 2001; McLeod, 2000; Cooper and Dunne, 1998; Delamont et al., 1997). Yet it is unclear what the concept of habitus adds to such work. An attempt has been made to use habitus in a quantitative study of education (Dumais, 2002), but this study simply denotes occupational expectations, quite arbitrarily, as 'habitus'. So, the main use of habitus is to give a veneer of theoretical sophistication to empirical findings.

2.2.2 Structure and Agency: the Role of Habitus

Given the messiness of the concept of habitus, one might ask why Bourdieu introduces it into his theory at all. The answer is that Bourdieu thinks that

the concept of habitus solves a fundamental problem in sociology — the conflict between structure and agency.

Bourdieu attacks crude structuralism on the grounds that "certain structuralists" see "agents as the simple 'supports' of structures invested with the mysterious power of determining other structures." (Bourdieu, 1977a, p. 487)

However, Bourdieu also criticises methodological individualism. Certain "atomistic" mobility researchers are singled out for attack on the grounds that they do not recognise that social mobility can coexist with stable class structures. Bourdieu protects himself here by failing to name the researchers he is referring to, and it would be hard to imagine a mobility researcher failing to recognise this simple point.

According to Bourdieu, if we wish to avoid the dichotomy between individualism and structuralism:

> "This means that our object becomes the production of the habitus, that system of dispositions which acts as mediation between structures and practice; more specifically, it becomes necessary to study the laws that determine the tendency of structures to reproduce themselves by producing agents endowed with the system of predispositions which is capable of engendering practices adapted to the structures and thereby contributing to the reproduction of the structures" (Bourdieu, 1977a, p. 487)

Bourdieu notes that working class students are more likely to drop out of the education system than middle and upper-class students, even if we control for previous achievement. He claims that this is a more important mechanism of selection than exam failure.

> "Thus, previous performances being equal, pupils of working-class origin are more likely to 'eliminate themselves' from secondary education by declining to enter it than to eliminate themselves once they have entered, and a fortiori more likely not to enter than to be eliminated from it by the explicit sanction of examination failure." (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990, p. 153)

Bourdieu claims that this phenomenon can be explained in terms of the working class habitus. The habitus is in some way formed by the objective chances of success shared by the class. The habitus in turn determines the actions of the members of the class.

> "...the negative predispositions towards the school which result in the self-elimination of most children from the most culturally unfavoured classes and sections of a class ...must be understood as an anticipation, based upon the unconscious estimation of the objective probabilities of success possessed by the whole category, of the sanctions objectively reserved by the school for those classes or sections of a class deprived of cultural capital." (Bourdieu, 1977a, p. 495)

The objections to this are obvious. Firstly, how can an estimation be unconscious? If habitus is not generated by conscious individuals, where does it come from? Secondly, even if an individual knows the objective probabilities of success possessed by the whole category, why do they not recognise that, by changing their attitude to the education system, the individual may escape the fate of the rest of their category?

Thirdly, Bourdieu seems to be arguing that people's behaviour is the result of accepting the "objective probabilities" of future success. However,

as Jenkins points out, "Something which happens at time 'x' cannot be accounted for by the likely state of affairs — as predicted by statistics — at the time '$x+1$'." (Jenkins, 1992, p. 81). Expectations about the future must be based upon the present. The actions based on these expectations create social reality, rather than "objective probabilities" creating expectations which lead to action.

It might be argued that it is uncharitable to interpret Bourdieu as putting forward an explanation of current events in terms of future events. But even if we interpret Bourdieu more kindly as arguing that lower-class pupils do not pursue demanding educational options because they are aware of the current tendency of the class as a whole not to pursue such options, it must be admitted that this is a feeble explanation. If we were happy to accept explanations of the characteristics of individuals which simply refer us to the characteristics of the group of which these individuals are members, without explaining these characteristics, there would be little need for sociology.

In sum, the notion of habitus utterly fails in Bourdieu's stated purpose of avoiding both structuralist determinism and "atomism". It has been observed that the notion of habitus is completely deterministic, leaving no place for individual agency or even individual consciousness (DiMaggio, 1979; King, 2000). Yet Bourdieu denies the charge of determinism on the grounds that the same habitus will produce different practices in different social fields, and the habitus can be changed by changed circumstances (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 116). The speciousness of this argument can be illustrated by the fact that the same charge will produce different motion in different electric fields - which hardly shows that electromagnetism has a role for individual freedom.

2.3 Science and Language

Along with many writers on Bourdieu (Heath, 1982; Hammersley, 1981; Jenkins, 1992, 1989) I have complained that Bourdieu fails to express his theory clearly. This failure is bound up with Bourdieu's rejection of what he describes as a "...positivist conception of science..." (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 19–20). Of course, Bourdieu does not define what he means by positivism. Instead, he uses the common ploy of denouncing all research that attempts to test hypotheses empirically as positivist without actually saying what he thinks is wrong with this type of methodology. The rejection of the importance of deriving hypotheses from a theory and attempting to test these hypotheses allows Bourdieu to be unapologetic in the use of poorly defined concepts.

> "Especially in the Anglo–Saxon tradition, people criticise the researcher for using concepts that function as signposts pointing to phenomena that are worth examining but that often remain obscure and vague, even if they are suggestive and evocative." (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 40)

Against such Anglo–Saxon criticisms, Bourdieu asserts that, because the social world is complex, theories about it must be complicated, and must be expressed in complicated language.

> "I think that, literary and stylistic qualities apart, what Spitzer says about Proust's style is something I could say about my own writing. He says, firstly, that what is complex can only be said in a complex way; secondly, that reality is not only complex, but also structured...if you want to hold the world in all its complexity and at the same time order and articulate it...you

> have to use heavily articulated sentences that can be practically reconstructed like Latin sentences. . . " (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 51–52)

The absurdity of this argument is easily shown. Firstly, the aim of science is not to "hold the world in all its complexity", and the history of science tells us that a simple theory will be preferred to a more complicated theory if the simpler theory has equal or superior predictive power, e.g. Copernicus' defeat of Ptolemaic astronomy. Furthermore, it simply is not true that a difficult concept or theory must be expressed in difficult language.

The real purpose served by the obscurity of Bourdieu's prose is to protect his own work from refutation. Bourdieu's strategy in dealing with criticism is to claim that his critics have not understood his work, and to imply that his critics are just jealous because they are not as clever as him.

> ". . . they criticise not my analyses, but an already simplified, if not maimed, representation of my analyses. This is because they invariably apply to them the very modes of thought, and especially distinctions, alternatives and oppositions, which my analyses are aimed at destroying and overcoming." (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 107)

The point that the critic may not agree that Bourdieu has succeeded in destroying such oppositions is ignored by Bourdieu, who never deals with specific criticisms in a direct way.

When a criticism is made of Bourdieu, the explanation for this is always to be found in the inadequacies of the critic. So, behind "positivist methodology" lies an "epistemology of resentment" which allows its advocates to "prohibit others from doing what they themselves are unable to do, so that

they can impose their own limits on others."(Bourdieu, 1990, p. 35) "Positivism" is simply "... a tradition often appealed to by the most mediocre of researchers in order to 'pare the lion cubs' claws', as Plato put it — in other words, to disparage and reduce the creations and innovations of the scientific imagination." (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 40)

So, although Bourdieu declares a "headlong, rather crazy commitment to science" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 26), his rejection of scientific values is made plain. Furthermore, his impenetrable prose style should not be seen simply as an irritation for the reader, but rather as being closely bound up with this rejection of scientific values, since clarity makes a theory amenable to testing, whereas obscurity protects it from falsification.

3 Empirical Evidence on Cultural Capital

The theory of cultural reproduction has generated a great deal of empirical work. Most of this work focuses on the link between cultural capital and educational attainment. The evidence is mixed, largely due to widely varying operationalisations of cultural capital. Evidence on the link between educational attainment and social reproduction and mobility will also be examined. There has been less focus on this part of Bourdieu's theory, but such evidence as there is suggests that educational capital is as much a vehicle of social mobility as of social reproduction.

3.1 Bourdieu's Own Evidence

Bourdieu is adamant that he does not engage in theory for its own sake, and that empirical work is central to his enterprise.

> "Let me say outright and very forcefully that I never 'theorise',

> if by that we mean engage in the kind of conceptual gobbledegook... that is good for textbooks and which, through an extraordinary misconstrual of the logic of science, passes for Theory in much of Anglo-American social science... There is no doubt a theory in my work, or, better, a set of thinking tools visible through the results they yield, but it is not built as such... It is a temporary construct which takes shape for and by empirical work." (Waquant, 1989, p. 50)

Unfortunately, the claim that Bourdieu's theoretical framework is subordinate to the needs of empirical research is not backed by the evidence he provides regarding cultural reproduction.

For Bourdieu's theory to be backed empirically, he would need to show that:

1. Parental cultural capital is inherited by children.
2. Children's cultural capital is converted into educational credentials.
3. Educational credentials are a major mechanism of social reproduction in advanced capitalist societies.

Of course, Bourdieu does not deny that privilege can be inherited through means other than the acquisition of educational credentials. Inheritance of property, and occupational advantage gained through social networks are obvious examples of this. So, Bourdieu's theory is not refuted by empirical evidence that there is no absolute correspondence between credentials and occupational outcomes. However, it is crucial to Bourdieu's theory that cultural capital actually does facilitate educational success, and that educational success actually is associated with occupational advantage, even if this is only a means of legitimating class inequalities.

Bourdieu claims that (1) and (2) are shown:

> "... by the fact that, among the pupils of the grandes écoles, a very pronounced correlation may be observed between academic success and the family's cultural capital measured by the academic level of the forbears over two generations on both sides of the family..." (Bourdieu, 1977a, p. 497)

Bourdieu is not entitled to assume that a high parental level of education reveals a high level of parental cultural capital. As pointed out by De Graaf (1986), Bourdieu's use of parental educational credentials as a measure of cultural capital begs the question of whether educational credentials simply constitute "... embodied cultural capital that has received school sanctioning" (Bourdieu and Boltanski, 1981, p. 145). In addition, the use of bivariate analyses is crude. Clearly, a simple association between two variables is not convincing evidence of a causal relationship. Bourdieu fails to show that parental cultural capital is inherited by the children, and that this is the mechanism through which higher-class pupils tend to attain higher educational credentials than lower-class pupils. His evidence is quite consistent with educational privilege being passed down through mechanisms other than cultural capital, such as parental encouragement and material resources.

Bourdieu also presents evidence that both social class and educational attainment are strongly associated with participation in cultural activities such as book reading and buying, and cinema, theatre, concert and museum attendance (Bourdieu and Boltanski, 1981, p. 490–2). However, on their own, these figures do not really back up Bourdieu's theory. They do not constitute evidence that participation in cultural activities is the mechanism

by which middle class parents ensure good qualifications for their children.

In sum, Bourdieu assumes much of what he sets out to prove. It is circular to treat educational level as a proxy for cultural capital if one is trying to assess whether cultural capital does in fact help to determine the educational levels reached by individuals.

3.2 Other Research on Cultural Reproduction

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is not clearly defined, and it is not particularly surprising that it has been operationalised in various different ways. And given that researchers have operationalised the concept of cultural capital in different ways, it is not surprising that empirical studies of the effect of cultural capital on educational attainment have varied in their conclusions. Since Bourdieu's definition of cultural capital is not precise, it is not clear what an 'authentic' operationalisation would consist of, and many studies appear to take the convenient route of defining cultural capital in terms of those measures that are readily available in some dataset. However, Bourdieu does explicitly state the importance of linguistic competence. Cultural 'competence' and 'familiarity' can reasonably be interpreted as knowledge of and participation in the dominant culture. Despite this, most investigations of cultural capital have not included data on linguistic ability or cultural knowledge. Data on cultural activities other than reading has often tended towards highly exclusive activities such as gallery attendance, which are foreign to a large proportion even of the middle and upper-classes. Since doubt has been cast on the importance of such forms of participation in high culture as a basis for social and cultural exclusion, at least outside the French context (Lamont and Lareau, 1988; Lamont, 1992), an exclusive reliance on such items seems misguided. Commonly, the proxy of parental education

is used instead of data on parental cultural capital, although this proxy clearly begs the question of whether occupational status and educational attainment actually do reflect the possession of cultural capital. In general, surveys include data on either pupils' or parents' cultural participation, but not both.

It has been argued that Bourdieu's own operationalisation of the concept of cultural capital is quite inadequate. Yet Bourdieu is not the only author to use parental education as a proxy for cultural capital. Authors who use this proxy include Halsey et al. (1980), Robinson and Garnier (1985), Jonsson (1987) and Egerton (1997). Halsey et al. (1980) use the Oxford Mobility Study, a survey of 10,000 adult males in England and Wales. Their measure of cultural capital is a combined measure of the level of qualifications attained by the respondent's father and the type of school attended by the respondent's brother, and they find (using path analysis) that this measure is associated with the type of school attended by respondents, but has no further effects on educational outcomes. Jonsson (1987) uses Swedish survey data based on a random sample of the adult population, collected in 1968, 1974, and 1981. Parents' education is used as a proxy for cultural capital. Jonsson assesses the hypothesis that the importance of cultural resources in determining educational outcomes is increasing as compared to material resources, and finds that, in fact, the relative importance of parental occupational class and educational status remained stable during the course of the 20th century, and that parents' educational and occupational status affect students' educational attainment to a similar degree. Robinson and Garnier (1985) examine the role of education in class reproduction in France, (using logistic regression) and find that fathers' education is more important than fathers' social class in determining children's educational

attainment, but that the role of education in class reproduction has been exaggerated. Egerton (1997), using the National Child Development Study (NCDS) finds that managerial class parents are less highly educated than professional parents, and this leads to relatively low levels of educational attainment (defined in terms of chances of gaining A level, intermediate, and degree level qualifications) for the children of managers, especially if they are girls, but also stresses the role of material resources, as do Savage and Egerton (1997).

Other studies have attempted to measure cultural capital directly, but sometimes in a somewhat narrow or arbitrary way. For example, some studies use individual items, or items on one activity only, as measures of cultural capital. Lamb uses Australian data collected in 1983 on 358 Melbourne students in year 10 (age 15). Cultural capital is operationalised as attendance at art exhibitions during the past year, and, in the case of non-attendance, expressed desire to have attended. The effect of cultural capital on educational aspirations is analysed using step-wise multiple regression, controlling for social origin and type of school attended. Cultural capital is found to have a strong impact on plans to attend college for boys, but a weaker impact for girls. Graetz (1988) uses a sample of 2,197 Australian adults, surveyed in 1984-5. A measure of the number of books in the home when the respondent was aged 14 is used as a proxy for cultural capital, and Graetz finds a consistent impact on the number of years of schooling completed by respondents, controlling for parental education and family wealth. Katsillis and Rubinson (1990) use items exclusively measuring participation in formal culture. The measure of cultural capital used is composed of items on the self-reported level of attendance at museums and galleries, the theatre, and lectures, of 395 seniors from Greek public high schools in 1984.

No link is found between this measure of cultural capital and educational participation.

Attendance at cultural classes is another somewhat narrow measure of cultural capital. Aschaffenburg and Maas (1997) use a survey of public participation in the arts in the US administered in 1982, 1985, and 1992, with a sample size of 12,984. The measure of cultural capital is based on survey items asking adult respondents about their attendance at cultural classes (i.e. classes in the arts) throughout their youth. The authors acknowledge that this measure is problematic, since a child's participation in cultural classes may reflect parental investment in children's educational futures in general, rather than cultural capital per se. Respondents also provided information on their parents' cultural participation during the respondents' youth; listening to classical music or opera, taking the respondent to art museums or galleries, taking the respondent to performances of classical music, dance, or plays, and encouraging the respondent to read books (alpha = 0.72). Both parents' and respondents' cultural capital is found to be significantly associated with educational transitions across the students' educational careers. A problem with this study is the lack of controls for either parental occupation or income. Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell (1999) also operationalise cultural capital as attendance at cultural classes (art, music, dance), plus museum trips (alpha = 0.6). Using the US National Educational Longitudinal Survey (1988 and 1990, n = 16,189), they find (using linear regression, and controlling for SES and family structure) that cultural classes and museum trips have a significant positive effect on students' grade point averages and maths test scores, and the effect on grades does not vary by race.

Which cultural attributes should be seen as constituting capital cannot

be determined without empirical investigation, since the term cultural *capital* implies an analogy with economic capital, and therefore, a *return*. The return on cultural capital takes the form of educational credentials and, ultimately, occupational success. Therefore, it is necessary to examine which elements actually yield returns in the sense of contributing to educational success. DiMaggio was the first researcher to use a broad range of potential measures of cultural capital in order to explore the concept empirically. DiMaggio (1982) uses the US 'Project Talent' database, based on interviews with 1906 white 11th grade students carried out in 1960, and a follow-up in 1971. A wide range of items on students' attitudes to culture and participation in culture were used. In addition, tests were administered tapping students' familiarity with literature, music and art. Factor analysis distinguished three separate scales, the third of which is designated as 'cultural capital', and includes cultivated self-image (based on 10 self-evaluation items such as 'I enjoy beautiful things') , interest in symphony concerts, and participation in cultural activities (drawing, acting, attending concerts, reading literature). A vocabulary test score is used as a proxy for ability, and DiMaggio excludes cultural information from the analysis (linear regression) because of its high collinearity with this measure. (This is unfortunate, since it prevents any examination of the question of whether the effect of cultural participation on educational attainment is mediated by knowledge). Cultural interests are found to have no significant effect on self-reported grades (controlling for 'ability' and father's education) but cultural capital has a significant positive effect on grades, especially in non-technical subjects. In the case of women, the returns to cultural capital were greatest for individuals from high-status families, but for men, the returns were greatest to those from lower and middle status households.

DiMaggio and Mohr (1985) find the effect of cultural capital measured in this way extends to attenance at college and graduate school, and to marital selection. In Mohr and DiMaggio (1996), the same dataset is used, but Mohr and DiMaggio extend their interest to parental cultural capital, measured using a scale composed of items on cultural resources in the home when the respondent was growing up (books, musical instruments, hifi/stereo, classical records, art equipment, photo-developing equipment) and parents' reading certain magazines. Mohr and DiMaggio find that social class is only weakly associated with cultural capital, while household cultural resources are more strongly linked to respondents' cultural capital. The process of cultural transmission was found to be strongly gendered, with direct effects of fathers' occupation only for sons, and direct effects of mothers' education only for daughters.

If participation in cultural activities does lead to academic success, one may ask why this should be. Ganzeboom (1982) contrasts Bourdieu's view that participation in high-culture is an assertion of elite status with the 'information-processing' view, according to which the type of cultural participation engaged in by different groups is explained by the information-processing capacities of individuals in those groups. A potential explanation of the association between cultural participation and academic success, which is linked to the 'information-processing' view, is that participation in cultural activities leads to the development of knowledge or skills, which in turn enable pupils to succeed at school. For instance, one might expect reading novels to contribute to both linguistic competence and cultural knowledge, and to therefore be associated with school success. Some studies have refined the cultural reproduction approach by breaking 'cultural capital' down into its constituent parts, in order to examine the mechanisms

through which it operates. Public cultural participation (e.g. theatre visits) tends to be seen as 'status-seeking', while reading is seen as developing and/or reflecting cognitive skill.

De Graaf (1988) uses data collected from the parents and teachers of 1,031 pupils who had entered secondary school in 1967 in the Federal Republic of Germany. The measure of cultural capital used is composed of responses on parents' 'interests' (in politics, philosophy, other cultures, reading prestigious magazines) and 'reading behaviour' (number of books in the home, number of books read last year, interest in books). Controlling for cognitive skills, as measured by teacher-reported elementary school grades, reading climate had a direct effect on the chances of entering a *gymnasium* (the most prestigious form of secondary schooling) but parental interests do not. In addition, De Graaf (1986) estimates linear structural models in which educational attainment is predicted by social background and by indicators of parents' financial and cultural resources, using the 1977 Dutch 'Quality of Life Survey'. Two measures of parents' cultural resources were used, 1. Reading (number of hours per week spent reading and library visits per month), 2. Cultural Participation (visits per month to museums, galleries, theatres, concerts, historical buildings). Factor analysis supported the view that reading and cultural participation should be seen as separate factors. De Graaf finds that parents' participation in formal culture has no impact on children's educational attainment, but parents' reading behaviour has some effect. Two cohorts are used (younger cohort n=317 families, older cohort n=221 families) to examine changes in the relative importance of cultural and financial resources in determining educational attainment over time, and it is found that the influence of financial resources has disappeared since 1950, and the influence of cultural resources has also declined, although

parental occupation and education retain their importance.

Crook (1997) breaks cultural capital into two parts, reading and beaux arts participation. Beaux arts participation refers to participation in formal cultural activities outside the home, such as gallery, theatre and concert attendance. Crook uses the 1993 Australian National Social Science Survey, a random sample of adult Australians (n = 2,760). Respondents provided information on both their own cultural practices as adolescents and as adults, and on their parents' cultural practices. Factor analysis supports the separation of cultural capital into beaux arts and reading dimensions. Beaux arts items recorded the frequency of attendance at ballet, opera, classical concerts, museums, theatre, and of classical music listening at home, (alpha for this scale ranges from 0.69 - 0.75). Reading items record the frequency of reading serious books and practical books, library visits, and also the total number of books owned, (alpha ranges from 0.57 - 0.75). Crook controls for parental education, fathers' occupation and material resources in his analyses, and finds that parents' and children's cultural capital are associated, but there is no rigid transmission of cultural capital from parent to child. Educational outcomes (respondent-reported school grades and years of education) are modelled using linear regression. A substantial effect of childhood reading is found. A small but significant parental beaux arts effect is found, but respondents' own beaux arts participation is not significant. Crook also examines occupational outcomes, and finds that the occupational returns to cultural participation are indirect, being entirely mediated by educational attainment.

De Graaf et al. (2000) also divide cultural participation into reading and beaux arts. They use the Netherlands Family Survey 1992-1993, a random sample of adults (n=1,653). Respondents were asked about their parents'

cultural participation when they themselves were aged 15, but not their own cultural participation. Beaux arts participation reflects the frequency of parental attendance at art museums, historical museums, opera or ballet, classical concerts and the theatre (alpha = 0.80). Reading behaviour reflects whether parents read regional or historical novels, thrillers, science fiction or war novels, Dutch literature, translated literature, and literature in a foreign language (alpha = 0.73). The effect of cultural capital on educational attainment is modelled using linear regression, and controlling for parental educational attainment, father's occupational status, parental financial resources, family structure, and birth cohort. The effect of parental reading on respondents' educational attainment is significant, though smaller than the effect of financial resources. Parental beaux arts participation has no significant effect.

Both Crook (1997) and De Graaf et al. (2000) find that reading is strongly associated with academic success whereas beaux arts participation is not, and infer from this that the effect of cultural capital on educational attainment is due to the 'educative resources' such as analytic and cognitive skills which are developed by reading, rather than to the communication of status via participation in formal culture. However, this inference may be questioned, since one could argue that participation in beaux arts may contribute to the development of skills and knowledge, or that students' reading is as likely to communicate status, and prejudice teachers in their favour as is participation in other cultural activities.

Sullivan (2001, 2000), in a study of 465 English year 11 (age 16) students, breaks cultural participation down into four categories; reading (type and amount of books read, library use, newspapers read), TV viewing (watching relatively 'highbrow' programmes), music (listening to classical or jazz, play-

ing an instrument), and 'public' cultural participation (art gallery, theatre, and concert attendence). Tests of cultural knowledge and vocabulary were also administered, in order to allow the 'development of skills' hypothesis to be tested. Respondents were also surveyed on their parents' cultural participation, (a measure composed of: reading behaviour, number of books in the home, newspapers taken, music and radio stations listened to, subjects discussed in the home, and art gallery, theatre and concert attendence). Linear regression analysis shows no significant association between the music and public cultural participation measures and examination grades subsequently achieved, whereas reading and TV watching habits are significantly associated with grades (controlling for parents' education and social class). Furthermore, students' vocabulary and cultural knowledge scores fully mediate the effect of cultural participation on exam grades, supporting the 'development of skills' hypothesis. Sullivan argues that the important distinction is not that between 'public' and 'private' cultural participation, but that between verbal or literary forms which use words to transmit content (including cultural information) and visual or musical forms which are not based on words or the transmission of information, and are therefore less likely to develop the skills which are rewarded within the school.

Of course, the direction of causality between cultural knowledge and participation may be queried. Ganzeboom (1982) interprets his finding of a high level of association between cultural knowledge and cultural participation as evidence for the view that high levels of knowledge and skill allow people to understand and enjoy cultural stimuli, therefore making cultural participation more likely. It seems plausible that both these mechanisms operate - cultural participation develops cultural knowledge and skill, which in turn allows greater cultural appreciation, making further cultural participation

more likely.

An alternative mechanism of cultural reproduction is found in the suggestion that the culture of the school reflects the dominant culture. This could occur if teachers are prejudiced in favour of pupils who display 'cultured' traits, and therefore give them higher grades. Farkas et al. (1990) find that the course grades awarded by teachers are not entirely determined by coursework mastery, but are also affected by students' skills, presentational styles, and work habits (though no discrimination by race or SES is found). This view is perhaps most relevant in the US, where grades awarded by teachers are an important outcome of schooling, whereas in most European nations the key outcome of schooling is the results gained in national examinations. Alternatively, the dominant culture could be ingrained in the curriculum. However, it has been pointed out that, although this may be true of France, there is little emphasis on highbrow culture in schools in countries such as Britain, the Netherlands, and the US (De Graaf et al., 2000). A related possibility is that children without cultural capital may experience school as a culturally hostile environment. This may be less to do with high-culture than with styles of interaction with the school (Lareau and Horvat, 1999) and the styles and rhythms of daily life for children of different social classes (Lareau, 2000).

In addition, it is unclear whether cultural capital is a mechanism of social reproduction or of social mobility. Those studies that measure both parents' and children's cultural participation find a strong association between the two, net of other background factors (Ganzeboom, 1982; Crook, 1997; Sullivan, 2001), suggesting that cultural capital is transmitted within the home, although the statistical relationship is not as rigid as Bourdieu's theory would suggest. The link between social class and cultural partici-

pation is not so strong, although the professional classes have particularly high levels of cultural participation (Ganzeboom, 1989). Bourdieu suggests that lower-class individuals who attempt to appropriate high culture should not reap the full benefit. On the whole, the evidence does not support this view. DiMaggio (1982) finds that, among males, educational returns to cultural capital are restricted to students from lower and middle class homes, whereas among women, returns to cultural capital are greatest to those from high status families. De Graaf et al. (2000) find that educational returns to cultural participation are highest to the children of parents with low levels of education. Kalmijn and Kraaykamp (1996) present cultural capital as a route to social mobility for disadvantaged ethnic groups, as the authors find that the faster increase in cultural capital among blacks compared to whites has contributed to the convergence in educational attainment (measured as years of education).

A further problem for the theory of cultural reproduction is the incomplete relationship between educational attainment and occupational outcomes. It is well established that social class of origin has an impact on individuals' occupational destinations net of educational attainment (Marshall et al., 1997). Savage and Egerton (1997) suggest that the strong social class effect on occupational outcomes which remains controlling for measured ability is evidence of the importance of material, rather than just cultural, resources. Robinson and Garnier (1985) suggest that the role of education in class reproduction in France has been exaggerated, and other mechanisms of class transmission, such as the inheritance of property, underestimated. In fact, Robinson and Garnier (1985) state that educational credentials provide a means of social mobility rather than social reproduction. So perhaps the school is a progressive rather than a conservative force after all.

Bourdieu suggests that the importance of cultural resources has increased over time, as financial barriers to educational participation have been removed. However, those studies which have examined this hypothesis have not supported it (De Graaf, 1986; Jonsson, 1987; Halsey et al., 1980).

In sum, varied operationalisations of the concept of cultural capital have led to varied results in the empirical work in this field. The majority of studies show that cultural participation is associated with educational attainment, but that a substantial social class effect remains unexplained by 'cultural capital' however it is measured. Those researchers that have broken down the concept of cultural capital in order to assess which cultural activities are associated with educational success have supported the view that participation in formal or 'beaux arts' culture is irrelevent to educational success, whereas reading is a significant factor. This has been seen as evidence that an explanation of the effect of cultural capital in terms of skills aquired by students is more plausible than an explanation in terms of prejudice from teachers. It should be noted that there is nothing new in the most plausible element of Bourdieu's theory — the observation that the middle or upper-class child often enjoys cultural as well as economic advantages. This insight need not go hand in hand with an acceptance of 'cultural reproduction' theory as such. Writing well before Bourdieu, Floud et al. (1956) divide the resources associated with the home into 'material' and 'cultural' categories. Their measure of cultural resources includes parents' knowledge of the selection procedures of the grammar schools, parents' visits to the child's school, parents' aspirations and preferences for the child's education, newspapers and magazines read and library membership. Although much of the work cited here suggests that cultural resources matter, it does not necessarily support Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction as a whole.

4 Conclusions

Bourdieu's project is extremely ambitious, and I have argued that many elements of Bourdieu's theoretical work are empirically unhelpful. For example, habitus is a concept with some intuitive plausibility, but is at once too all-inclusive and too vacuous to be of any use to empirical researchers. Bourdieu's claim that the notion of habitus solves the conflict between structure and determinism on the one hand and agency and individualism on the other is quite unjustified. In fact Bourdieu's theory has no place not only for individual agency, but even for individual consciousness.

The part of Bourdieu's theory which has been most influential, and most fruitful for empirical researchers is the concept of cultural capital. However, it must be acknowledged that this concept is not clearly defined. The related concept of the cultural arbitrary is also limited by vagueness. Bourdieu has some valuable insights into arbitrary practices in higher education. However, he does not distinguish clearly enough between standards which are prejudicial to lower-class pupils and students because they are arbitrary, and standards which are prejudicial to lower-class pupils and students because they do not have the resources to meet those standards.

In general, research has found that cultural capital (defined in various ways) has some impact on educational attainment, but does not explain all or even most of the social class effect. In terms of labour market outcomes, although educational credentials are an important mechanism for the allocation of occupational positions, the direct effects of social class should not be underestimated. Furthermore, it is not clear to what extent educational credentials are a mechanism of social reproduction or of social mobility. Some of the empirical findings on cultural capital seem to contradict one another. This may be partly due to the fact that these studies were carried

out at different times in different countries. It may be that cultural capital is more important in some countries than in others, or operates differently in different countries at different times. For example Lamont and Lareau (1988) and Lamont (1992) argue that cultural participation is not as class-differentiated in the US as in France, and cast doubt on the importance of participation in high culture as a basis for social and cultural exclusion in the US. However, the main reason for the variable findings presented here is the different methodologies used in each study, and in particular, the array of different operationalisations of cultural capital that are used. Given that some elements of cultural participation appear to be associated with educational success while others are not, the most fruitful approach for researchers appears to be that of examining cultural factors in detail, as part of the broader project of explaining class differentials in educational attainment.

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