

Critical Review

Bourdieu's Social Reproduction Thesis and The Role of Cultural Capital in Educational Attainment: A Critical Review of Key Empirical Studies

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Abstract: *This critical review examines key quantitative evidence in studies regarding the role of cultural capital in the links between family social class, teachers, schools and students' educational outcomes as specified in Bourdieu's social reproduction thesis. Cultural capital is assumed to be one of the central family-based endowments whose social class value impacts offspring intergenerational educational probabilities unequally. Inequalities in educational stratification and occupational achievement are reproduced via schools. As an analytic concept, cultural capital has generated considerable interest. But as a mechanism of class analysis the social reproduction thesis, and the role of cultural capital in it, cannot be confirmed empirically in large-scale representative, longitudinal data (or across various national settings). The role of teachers and schools, argued in Bourdieu's theory to be central agents of exclusion and reproduction of class inequality connecting families to stratification outcomes cannot be confirmed in quantitative research. Cultural capital seen strictly as a mechanism of class reproduction as specified in Bourdieu's framework, has limited analytic potential that restricts its application in multicultural societies. Some alternative applications are discussed.*

Contextualisation

Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction offers a paradigm of class analysis argued to be capable of explaining persistent inequalities in educational stratification despite state efforts at educational expansion cross-nationally, including Britain. The mechanism argued to perpetuate and reproduce structured social inequalities in society is based on the effective transmission of family-based parental endowments to the offspring. Parents endow their children with physical, human, social and especially cultural capital whose transmissions create inequalities in children's educational and occupational attainment. Bourdieu argues that schools and teachers aid and abet this family-based reproduction process by rewarding possession of elite cultural capital in students and by setting up elitist standards rigged to favour upper and middle class children and exclude others. While key qualitative research has pointed to the relative disadvantage of certain pupils at school, large-scale quantitative research has not confirmed Bourdieu's hypothesis. Further, quantitative evidence does not show that teachers use arbitrary cultural criteria of students' competencies or performances. This paper reviews key quantitative studies and provides an opportunity for educators to examine Bourdieu's social reproduction thesis from a quantitative perspective.

Introduction

Bourdieu's *social reproduction* thesis (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) has focused research on the relation between *education*, *family*, and *social class*. Bourdieu argues that education plays an important role in aiding and abetting the reproduction of social inequality and social exclusion. *Cultural capital* assumes central importance in the above process of social reproduction because inequalities in cultural capital reflect inequalities in social class. But the reproduction of these inequalities is argued by Bourdieu to be facilitated in schools where teachers' pedagogic actions promote the cultural capital of the dominant class by rewarding

students who possess such capital and by penalising others who do not. Thus, the school becomes a central agent of social exclusion and reproduction.

However, large-scale quantitative research offers little or no empirical support for the argued significance of cultural capital. This paper will present Bourdieu's social reproduction thesis and then critically examine key empirical studies in quantitative research on the link between cultural capital and educational attainment. The review argues that persistent inequalities in educational attainment may be unrelated to the cultural capital-based mechanism as this is defined and described by Bourdieu. Cultural capital can be retained both as a heuristic and analytically potent concept but should be operationally unbound to Bourdieu's original but restrictive class-analytic framework.

Bourdieu's Social Reproduction Thesis: Cultural Capital, Habitus and Schools

In Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, cultural capital refers to transmissible parental cultural codes and practices capable of securing a *return* to their holders. Cultural capital embodies the sum total of investments in aesthetic codes, practices and dispositions transmitted to children through the process of family socialisation, or in Bourdieu's term, *habitus*. Habitus is an important form of cultural *inheritance*, reflects class position or the actors' location in a variety of fields and is geared to the perpetuation of structures of dominance (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, p 204-205). Because family habitus varies by class, only middle-class or elite cultural resources can become cultural *capital* valued in society. Knowledge and possession of "highbrow" culture is argued by Bourdieu to be unequally distributed according to social class and education, to be institutionalised as legitimate, and to confer *distinction* and *privilege* to those who possess and deploy it. Along with economic, social and human capitals, such cultural *capital* actively *reproduces* social inequalities.

The value of such 'highbrow' culture is also recognised and rewarded in schools unevenly (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Children exposed to elite culture at home are advantaged in schools. Teachers recognise and reward this advantage thus excluding other children who lack similar cultural capital. This pedagogic action subjects working class or minority pupils to a form of 'symbolic violence' forcing them into a competitive mechanism that rewards only dominant cultural capital. However, this pedagogic action is recognised as meritocratic and legitimate. The dominant culture thus appears as the *opposite* of what it really is, namely, arbitrary, via a process of 'misrecognition' (Bourdieu, 1977; 1974, p 32). Utilising and promoting such arbitrary criteria of assessment, it is argued that teachers introduce bias in their grading of student educational performance by actually rewarding elite culture-related competences rather than scholastic performance. Thus, schools reproduce particular forms of intergenerational social mobility and stratified outcomes.

Quantitative empirical evidence concerning the effects of family-based cultural capital and habitus on students' educational attainment and the role of the schools and teachers in the social reproduction mechanism follows.

Empirical Evidence

Influence of Family and Habitus on Children

Early evidence suggested that parental cultural capital affected children's early (DiMaggio, 1982) and later educational attainment (DiMaggio and Mohr, 1985). Further, children from higher socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds performed better than lower SES children across SES measures (Bidwell and Friedkin, 1988) as shown in studies in the UK (Irwin,

2009), the US (Portes, Fernández-Kelly and Haller, 2009) and comparative data from most Western European countries (Treiman and Yip, 1989; Müller and Karle, 1993; Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993; Goldthorpe, 1996). Parental family endowments necessary for educational success in adult life can be transmitted intergenerationally (Schoon and Parsons, 2002; Feinstein, Duckworth and Sabates, 2004). However, social class differentials in educational performance remain, net of both children's ability and parental background factors. Authors have suggested that this leaves room for a family 'cultural' effect to be influencing children's development (Goldthorpe, 2007; Sullivan, 2007). But for culture to explain the remaining variation in parental social class background, this 'cultural' effect has to persist over time, net of other determinants of achievement. Also, Bourdieu's theory would lead us to expect that the social class effect on children's educational success would be mediated by both parental and children's cultural endowments.

For such links to exist however, strong non-spurious associations are needed between parental social class and parent's and offspring's cultural capital and between parent's and the child's cultural capital and the child's educational achievement. In empirical studies undertaken to date there is no conclusive evidence that these associations exist (Kingston, 2001). Katsillis and Rubinson (1990) using data from Greece, found a significant association between parental SES and offspring cultural capital but no association between the latter and adolescents' high-school performance. Adolescents' cultural capital in fact failed to mediate the effect of any exogenous variable on their academic achievement. Also, these researchers did not measure parental cultural capital directly. Robinson and Garnier (1985) using French data also cast doubt on the role of education as a major mechanism of class reproduction. Based on an analysis of data from a large survey of employed men and women in France, they failed to isolate any strong association between men's or women's cultural or educational capital. Further, father's educational capital failed to mediate between father's social class and offspring's socioeconomic achievement. Thus, intergenerational *reproduction* of social class-based advantage was not demonstrated. Later research with more sophisticated designs based on US data also failed to isolate any strong effect of students' cultural capital on students' academic grades, net of students' ability and social class at the individual or school levels (Dumais, 2002; 2006). Students' grades were found to be much more a function of ability, habitus and class. But in Dumais's study, 'habitus' simply referred to adolescents' occupational expectations. So results were unsurprising in that a moderate (reciprocal) link between students' occupational expectations and their grades has long been established (Picou and Carter, 1976; Cohen, 1983). Further, habitus in Dumais's study did not mediate between children's cultural capital and their grades. Based on Dutch cohort data, van de Werfhorst and Hofstede (2007) similarly showed that parental cultural participation was not statistically related to children's educational ambitions. This suggests that educational expectations form in *isolation* of cultural pursuits. In fact, Irwin (2009) showed that educational expectations in 13 year-old young people in England were more associated with young people's *perceptions* of parental emotional support, a measure of parental *social capital* (Coleman, 1988) rather than cultural capital.

However, certain effects of both parents' and an offspring's cultural capital on student grades and educational ambitions have been identified in both longitudinal and cross-sectional studies. In large-scale longitudinal studies, these effects are generally weak or modest and their significance is more due to cohort-size samples. In cross-sectional studies, statistically significant effects of cultural capital measures on young people's educational ambitions are not easily generalisable as they are based on rather small, non-representative samples (see for example, Noble and Davies, 2009). Cultural capital in DiMaggio's (1982) study, after controlling for parents' social class and the child's ability, had a significant relationship with the child's educational attainment but it could only account for less than 20% of the variation in students' grades. While the inclusion of a measure of cultural capital in the model did reduce the effect of social class substantially (father's education in that study), it was a reduction of an originally 'trivial effect' (DiMaggio, 1982, p 195). Further, the effect of father's

social class remained practically unaffected as a predictor of an offspring's educational attainment, both in childhood and in later adulthood, following the inclusion of a measure of the offspring's cultural capital (DiMaggio and Mohr, 1985, p 1255).

Kalmijn and Kraaykamp (1996) argued that African-Americans have increased their parental cultural capital during the last decades of the 20th century and that this increase is associated with a concomitant rise in human capital in this group reducing the black-white gap in cultural and human capital. But one cannot argue there is a *causal* relationship between parental human capital and cultural capital from this study. In Kalmijn and Kraaykamp's (1996) study, parental education is used as a sole measure of parental social class, while in other research parental education has been used as a measure of parental cultural capital (Jaeger and Holm, 2003). Thus, comparatively speaking, the argument on the causal link between parental social class and parental cultural capital appears circular (Sullivan, 2001, p 896). Further, as Kingston (2001, p 94) argues, Kalmijn and Kraaykamp (1996) leave out of their models important SES components, such as income and occupational prestige and the effect of cultural capital on student academic attainment is not net of ability. Neither is ability controlled for in Aschaffenburg and Maas's (1997) study despite the fact that its importance as a predictor of educational attainment had already been established (Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999). Aschaffenburg and Maas's (1997) study also found that while both parental cultural capital and student's cultural capital had significant effects on the odds of making particular educational transitions, these effects are *additive*. That is, student's cultural capital was *not* mediated by parental cultural capital, thus offering support not to Bourdieu's social reproduction hypothesis but to DiMaggio's 'cultural mobility' thesis (DiMaggio, 1982) dissociating cultural capital and social class. The influence of parental cultural capital was found to vary over time and to become strongest on an offspring's transition from high-school-to-college. Yet, such school transitions are neither linear, nor continuous and have different determinants (Mare, 1981; 1991; cf Breen, 1996; Breen and Jonsson, 2000). Further, the cultural capitals of parents and their children were found to be largely *independent* of each other. Student's odds of success in educational transitions have not been found to depend, either consistently or significantly, on parents' cultural capital. Since offspring's cultural capital hardly mediates the effects of father's social class or father's cultural capital on offspring's educational attainment, Bourdieu's central link between family class-based habitus effects and later educational achievement goes unsupported by those empirical studies.

For parental background to engage in the social reproduction process via cultural capital, parental cultural capital needs to be transmitted intergenerationally. But this requires four conditions: First, a strong association between parental and pupil's cultural capital must exist. Second, this association must persist over time. Third, parental cultural capital must exert significant effects, after controlling for other background factors, on an offspring's initial occupational achievement. Finally, the effects of parental social class on offspring's occupation must be significantly mediated by offspring's cultural capital. For transmission to translate itself into stratified educational outcomes, we need to know whether the effect of parental cultural capital persists significantly on the offspring's educational outcomes *before* that offspring enters the labour force.

Like Aschaffenburg and Maas (1997), Sullivan (2001) included measures of both parental and pupil's cultural capital. She found that parental cultural capital was strongly associated with parental social class, and pupil's cultural capital. Furthermore, pupil's cultural capital mediated considerably the effects of parental cultural capital on both language and knowledge scores. Yet, net of all cultural variables, social class still retained a significant direct effect on pupils' GCSE grades. Sullivan's design furthermore was cross-sectional, and the effects of pupil's cultural capital were not measured net of pupil's ability. Thus, Sullivan's claimed support for the social reproduction thesis is tentative. Sullivan's valuable insight however was that family background operates via the exposure of children to certain

activities of their parents. For example, the parent / pupil link in their cultural activities seems to affect educational performance by improving language skills and breadth of knowledge at home. But even this parental / pupil cultural capital link, as Sullivan correctly argues, should be seen as only *one* of the mechanisms by which inequality is maintained in educational stratification. Noble and Davies (2009) reformulated Sullivan's (2001) cultural capital measure for parents and children and found that such a measure had statistically significant but extremely weak effects on children's odds of their self-reported likelihood to participate in higher education (HE). Like Sullivan's (2001), Noble and Davies' (2009) research was based on a local, rather small, cross-sectional sample (N=350) so no causal inferences are possible. Social class, operationalised as dichotomous measures of parental occupation and education, had overall insignificant effects on students' odds for their self-reported HE likelihoods. But most importantly, parental education (taken by previous research to indicate parental cultural capital) had non-significant effects on students' odds of their self-reported likelihood for HE. Further, Noble and Davies' (2009) measure of students' cultural capital hardly mediated the influence of parental education (β reduced from 0.481 to 0.423 with the inclusion of students' cultural capital index or its partial measures). Students' attainment was an important factor influencing the odds for students' self-reported likelihoods for HE and its effect was mediated by students' cultural capital in the model (β reduced from 0.454 to 0.374). If anything, therefore, Noble and Davies' (2009) pointed to a disengagement of traditional social class indicators and cultural capital, hence disconfirming Bourdieu's central theoretical tenet.

Analyses using longitudinal data have also claimed that parents' cultural capital and family SES have more or less constant effects on children born in the beginning of the 20th century and those born in the 1960s (Jonsson, 1993; DeGraaf and Kalmijn, 2001). But while those studies test for the effect of parental cultural capital on an offspring's educational achievement net of children's cognitive ability, conclusions are still tentative due to the widely different measures of cognitive ability and ages at which they are measured. In addition, most studies do not seem to take account of the fact that cognitive ability itself is considerably influenced by social class (Savage and Egerton, 1997; Hatcher, 1998; Feinstein, 2003). Considering that parental effects on their offspring's cognitive ability crystallise early (Feinstein, 2003), it seems that parental cultural capital might exert effects on children's *early* rather than later educational attainments. This would be consistent with Boudon's (1974) suggestion that parental social class effects on children's educational outcomes should be separated into *primary* (causing initial differentials due to cultural, genetic and psychological influences) and *secondary* (comprising later effects on children net of these initial influences).

Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede (2007) in the Netherlands reported a strong and significant effect of parental cultural capital on primary school performance, net of parental education and social class but not net of pupil's ability. They found a mediating effect of social class in parental education's effect on school performance after including parental cultural capital in the model. Parents' cultural capital appeared to be a partial explanation of how educated parents affect their children's school grades. But this is not necessarily evidence of *transmission* of cultural capital. This is because we do not know if the pupil's own cultural capital, not measured in that study, was also related to grades, net of parental cultural capital. Unless this relation exists, there can be no support for Bourdieu's theory of *reproduction* of social privilege, and no indication of *transmission*, both central in Bourdieu's thesis. Without such evidence the finding of an effect of parental cultural capital on the child's educational attainment is a tentative indication of yet another resource inequality associated with parental social class disparities in offspring's educational achievement.

However, even where parents' social class, parents' cultural capital, the child's cultural capital and the child's cognitive ability are all controlled for, results should be interpreted with caution. Jaeger and Holm (2003) for example, measured parental cultural capital as parental

education. Thus, the claimed effects of father's social class and father's cultural capital on the offspring's educational attainment are likely to be capturing the effect of father's social class net of the effect of one of its components, not father's *cultural* capital as theorised by Bourdieu. So it is hardly surprising that the effect of father's social class was found to be much stronger than the effect of father's education on an offspring's educational achievement at 38 years of age. Adding the offspring's cognitive ability in the model improved its fit considerably. But the best fit of the model was obtained when offspring's cognitive ability and father's social class were the sole predictors in the model. Jaeger and Holm (2003) therefore confirmed the influence of cognitive ability and a modest influence of father's *human*, not cultural, capital on an offspring's educational attainment at 38 years of age.

Empirical evidence did not support Bourdieu's social reproduction thesis in the case of ethnic and racial minorities. There have been various efforts to disentangle the effects of ethnicity and race from those of social class in order to identify particular deficits in the cultural capital of particular ethnic groups (DiMaggio and Ostrower, 1992; Trienekens, 2002; van Wel, Couwenbergh-Soeterboek, Couwenbergh, ter Bogt and Raaijmakers, 2006). However, both quantitative (Fejgin, 1995; Driessen, 2001) and qualitative research (Lareau and McNamara-Horvat, 1999; Blackledge, 2001; Matthews, 2002; Trueba, 2002; Monkman, Ronald and Th eram ene, 2005) have shown that the type of cultural capital produced and transmitted in minority ethnic families is far removed from the Bourdieuan conception. Defined as highbrow cultural participation, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital has proved to be largely irrelevant to ethnic families, especially to those that are based on strong religious traditions. Race, on the other hand has been found to promote different hierarchies of cultural value, *not* necessarily linked to those of middle class privilege (Devine-Eller, 2005). Ethnicity, not social class, in complex interactions with gender, household type and age was found to determine patterns of and participation in leisure activity in Britain (Gayo-Cal, Savage and Warde, 2006). The formation of occupational aspirations was also found to vary by ethnicity in ways differentiating English from Asian youngsters (Gupta, 1977) and between US ethnic groups (Cheng and Starks, 2002). If anything, educational achievement differentials between ethnic groups, although still insufficiently studied in the UK seem to be a function of financial, human and social capitals. *Social* and financial, rather than cultural capital, seem to be important in enclave-linked economic success (Li, Devine and Heath, 2008). Thus, inequalities in social rather than cultural capital are more responsible for social class differentials between ethnic groups (Leibowitz, 1974; Teachman, 1987; Lareau and McNamara-Horvat, 1999; Greena and Vryonides, 2005). At best, *educational* capital, argued to be a combination of social and class-relevant cultural capital in the case of ethnic groups (Marjoribanks, 1999; 2003; 2005), seems to be directly related to children's orientations in educational achievement and to facilitate in them a norm of selective assimilation that promotes resilience and middle-class standards even if their parents' actual circumstances are below middle class (Telles and Ortiz, 2008; cf Portes *et al*, 2009). In the case of ethnic groups, therefore, family cultural capital assumes distinctive forms, far removed from the original class-based conception, which may create within-group inequalities in minority ethnic groups (Hage, 1998; Bennett and Silva, 2006).

Influence of the School and Teachers

Bourdieu's theory about the role of schools and teachers in the transmission of intergenerational inequalities rests on a number of assumptions about the teacher population and the school context. Each of these needs to be considered as separate hypotheses. To verify empirically the role of the school in promoting arbitrary cultural values via teachers, we have first to establish that teachers' cultural values, net of all other demographics, are qualitatively and quantitatively significantly different from those of the average public. We secondly have to examine the effect of school *context*, on the grades teachers give in

assessing student progress net of teachers' cultural capital and demographics. However, knowledge about teachers is limited (Kingston, 2001). When so-called 'teacher bias' has been reported, it is not clear whether such so-called bias is in fact an objective reflection of actual observed differences in student behaviour and performance. Alternatively, it could represent racist attitudes among teachers (Downey and Pribesh, 2004 cited in Devine-Eller, 2005). Alternatively, students' pro-academic orientations may be a cause rather than an effect of teachers' assessments of students' performance (Dumais, 2006).

Neither of the hypotheses concerning teachers' roles has been confirmed using large-scale survey data. Nor has any school *effect* been isolated convincingly in quantitative research on cultural capital. Whenever empirical studies have attempted to test the second hypothesis relating to school effects on children's educational achievement, results have been inconclusive. Dumais (2002) on the basis of NELS88 data using both standard OLS and fixed school-effects models reported that cultural capital had a positive, significant effect on the grades of girls but not of boys in the 8th grade (approximately 13 years of age), both with and without controlling for Bourdieu's notion of habitus. Yet in Dumais' (2002) study, habitus represented student's occupational expectations. So Dumais simply confirmed earlier research and did not demonstrate an effect of *parental* cultural capital on student's grades. Percentage of student participation in art classes at school level (what Dumais measured as a fixed school effect), had again a significant but small impact ($\beta = 0.02$) on students' grades. However when parental choice of school *type* was set as the *dependent* variable, parental choice was found to be affected by both parental social class and parental cultural capital (operationalised as parental involvement in highbrow culture). Parental cultural capital was found to mediate a considerable portion of the parental social class effect on parents' choice of secondary school type in the Netherlands (van de Werfhorst and Hofstede, 2007). But this does not confirm that secondary school type exerts an independent direct effect, net of student's family background, parental cultural capital and ability, on a student's educational performance. In fact, family cultural capital added virtually nothing to the explanatory power of social class. Even if these effects did exist, they would probably reflect the effect of parental social class on the *selection* of school, rather than being an unambiguous *independent* effect of parental cultural capital. Kingston (2001) similarly argues, that DiMaggio's (1982) and DiMaggio and Mohr's (1985) findings of the effects of parental background and school type on the child's grades cannot be unambiguously interpreted. Parental cultural capital may affect school choice and type but its effect seems to stop there. It does not necessarily affect students' grades.

Teacher assessments of students however are argued to reflect not only aptitude and performance in students, but also work habits, basic communicative and other *non-cognitive* skills. If these non-cognitive skills and habits can be shown to affect teacher's grading of pupils, the school - via teachers - can be held responsible for arbitrarily rewarding particular forms of cultural capital that thus excludes some students. Farkas, Grobe, Sheehan and Shuan (1990) tested this hypothesis and found that teacher-reported work habits determined coursework mastery and net of such mastery, student grades. Teachers rewarded both cognitive and non-cognitive skills and the latter mediated considerably objective valuations of student performance. However, Farkas *et al's* results require a more careful reading. They correctly argue that potential teacher bias in cultural resource / social intersections should be examined *longitudinally* so that the multiple feedbacks between teacher and student behaviour can be tapped (Farkas *et al*, 1990, p 129). Yet, their model is estimated cross-sectionally, which makes any causal inference impossible. Further, the non-cognitive work habits Farkas *et al* (1990) found that teachers rewarded over and above cognitive skills were unrelated to students' participation in highbrow culture. In fact, the non-cognitive measures that Farkas *et al* used were highly related to performance-enhancing habits: homework completion, class participation, effort and organisation. It would seem hard to expect teachers not to reward such habits. So it is likely that these habits are rewarded twice: First as habits in their own right, and second, via their effects on grades (Sullivan, 2001). Because

these criteria reflect a universally-accepted and promoted pedagogic practice, they are everything but arbitrary as Kingston (2001) correctly argues. Broderick and Hubbart (2000 cited in Kingston, 2001) have reached similar conclusions. Teachers were more positively disposed towards students that showed commitment and involvement. Such teacher dispositions had a direct effect on students' grades, net of *all* cultural variables, SES and reading ability. Further, none of the cultural capital measures were related to teachers' perceptions. Such measures could only account for a trivial portion of the variation in grades. Katsillis and Rubinson (1990) similarly found that effort and previous achievement were the two main determinants of high-school seniors' grades, net of all cultural variables. Teachers did not grade students on any cultural criterion, but they did reward effort. Bourdieu's hypothesis that the school system applied arbitrary (non-universal, non-objective criteria) was not supported in France (Robinson and Garnier, 1985), the US (Broderick and Hubbart, 2000 cited in Kingston, 2001), the UK (Sullivan, 2001; Goldthorpe, 2007), Greece (Katsillis and Rubinson, 1990) or the Netherlands (Driessen, 2001).

A different case can be made however if school-promoted cultural capital, as defined by Bourdieu, can be shown to promote certain *cognitive* skills. Sullivan (2001), for example, argued for unpacking cultural capital into a language skill-enhancing component and a participation in formal culture component. While this methodology is strongly opposed to on theoretical grounds (Bourdieu, 1986; Lareau and Weininger, 2003; Goldthorpe, 2007), it is the only way to analyse separate component effects. Sullivan (2001) found that almost all the effect of cultural capital on grades was due to the enhancement of pupils' reading skills and cultural knowledge. These influenced grades significantly, net of parental background. Yet, if teachers and schools reward those skills, they may be argued to promote cultural inequality indirectly since such cultural skill-enhancement resources are differentially distributed by social class. Thus the whole argument rests first, on the extent to which reading and television watching, argued by Sullivan (2001) to be linked to pupils' language skills, are indeed differentially distributed by parental social class. Second, it rests on the extent to which teachers' assessments can be shown to reward cultural capital, net of other cognitive skills and competencies. Neither hypothesis has been confirmed empirically.

Wright (2006) found that in the UK, while 'book culture' varied by social class, it was much less important for critical engagement than the dominant reading practice linked to magazines and newspapers, which did not vary by social class. Thus, Sullivan's (2001) finding cannot easily be linked to social class disparities in reading habits. Similarly, Bennett (2006) based on a representative sample of UK adult television viewers found that television viewing is an 'open-access' activity and that genre, programme and channel preferences differ primarily by age. Gender, occupational class and education were of only secondary importance in explaining variation in television viewing preferences. Social class background in the UK was found not to be a primary marker of television viewing. This finding makes it hard to argue that social class reproduction is linked to the particular skills Sullivan (2001) found to be associated with grades.

In the case of minority ethnic groups, however, exclusion practices at schools have been identified. Some quantitative studies report no differences between ethnic minorities and dominant native groups in parental contacts with school (Driessen, 2001). Qualitative studies in Britain and the US however, have been particularly sensitive to the ways parental cultural capital promotes ethnic and gender inequalities. Perhaps that is why some of these studies take the social reproduction process for granted (Lamont and Lareau, 1988; Levinson and Holland, 1996; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). These studies have generally pointed to the disadvantage of parents in school contacts in certain ethnic (Blackledge, 2001) and racial (Lareau, 1987; Lareau and McNamara-Horvat, 1999) groups. Other studies argued that students' agency could transform the social reproduction process by impacting on their school-based cultural capital (Olneck, 2000) and that teachers could promote both dominant and minority cultural capital in a non-conflictual manner (Monkman *et al*, 2005). Lareau's

(1987, p 82) central argument however largely exculpates schools from their role in the social reproduction thesis. She argued that both working-class and middle-class schools promoted a family-school relationship that solicited parental involvement and promoted independence in children. However middle-class families yielded a 'social profit' that was unmatched by working-class families. In other words, persistent family-based structural inequalities produced differences in the effectiveness of parents' school contacts exhibiting different levels of advocacy and mediation on behalf of their children but there was no evidence of schools discriminating against working class parents.

According to Goldthorpe (2007) Bourdieu's thesis about the role of teachers and schools must be rejected on both theoretical and empirical grounds. According to Goldthorpe (2007) despite the educational expansion that has occurred in England, persistent inequalities simply do not reflect any exclusion of working class children because those children have experienced increased educational intergenerational mobility (Halsey, Heath and Ridge, 1980). Far from reproducing inequality, schools are argued to 'complement, compensate for or indeed counter family influences' (Goldthorpe, 2007, p 14). In fact recent evidence shows that the expansion of the tertiary educational sector is associated with similar intergenerational processes (Schofer and Meyer, 2005 cited in Goldthorpe, 2007). Thus empirical data undermine the contention that pedagogic action discriminates in favour of the dominant class. But inequalities, especially in the case of UK minority ethnic groups, do persist despite the educational expansion (Dale, Lindley and Dex, 2006; Li *et al*, 2008) generating strong debate (see Goldthorpe, 1996; 2007; Blanden and Machin, 2003; 2007; Blanden, Gregg and Machin, 2003; 2005).

Conclusions

Quantitative evidence has generally failed to support Bourdieu's social reproduction hypothesis consistently, convincingly or unambiguously. Participation in highbrow culture or middle class-defined cultural pursuits may be related to social class but the relationship could be spurious. Associations of parental or children's cultural capital with children's educational attainment are generally weak and of problematic significance. It is unlikely that such weak associations could be mediated by parental SES. What is more, when using longitudinal data, the link between cultural capital and social class is weak. The relationship between teachers and cultural capital has not been studied in rigorous quantitative empirical studies. It is simplistic to assume that all teachers are blindly obedient to shadowy curricula, hidden agendas and lack will or critical ability. Teachers differ, apart from their class backgrounds and qualifications, in terms of at least their authority, seniority, experience, gender, ethnicity, networking, marital status, family size and personality. Each of these factors could affect their empathy, performance and commitment and all these factors may or may not vary by school context. It is naïve to assume that net of all the above, all teachers impose the dominant cultural capital on their students unquestionably. If anything, qualitative evidence has repeatedly shown how teachers can *positively* influence disadvantaged students (Portes *et al*, 2009). Bourdieu's claims about teachers' roles in the transmission of inequality cannot be generalised.

However, none of the above precludes the occurrence of social reproduction. Indeed, social reproduction may still occur *without* the mechanisms that Bourdieu has suggested as central. Inequalities may persist even when schools become more open and inclusive. Gender and ethnicity-related inequalities may persist in the face of extensive educational expansion. This leaves three possibilities open: Perpetuation of inequalities may work via schools but in a way different from that suggested by Bourdieu. Alternatively, schools may only be indirectly involved in this process. Finally, social reproduction may be a longitudinal process in one's life course as much affected by context and circumstance as by individual choice and risk. Thus, we need a different approach and methodology to study and understand why

inequalities persist. In all cases, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital does not offer an empirically supported framework for class analysis.

Goldthorpe (2007, p 19) argued for making a distinction between cultural *value* and cultural *resource*. Yet, cultural *resources* and cultural *capital* are not mutually exclusive especially if the latter is freed from its Bourdieuan garb. Resources may or may not become capital and values can catalyse resources *into* capital. Cultural values, cultural resources and cultural capital may exist in a system of their own. Qualitative studies taking social reproduction for granted foster attention on the micropolitical interaction between parents, teachers and students. But such treatments yoke cultural capital to its original Bourdieuan conception restricting the range of exploratory options only to identifying symbolic violence, exploitation and social class-based exclusion. Thus we do not know how agency reacts and *creates* cultural capital. Evidence shows that cultural capital localised in subcultural communities (ethnic, political, racial, religious), not only social class, is both a dependent and an independent variable. Culture *becomes* capital in defining in-group boundaries and local hierarchies of belonging but it is also generated through human interaction. Cultural capital that excludes out-group members is also capital that *includes* and bonds in-group members. It may strengthen both in-group and out-group identities. It is naïve to assume that such cultural capital should be linked only to class differentials or that it works only to secure class privilege. Cultural capital is an important component of *every* in-group.

This review argues for a retention of cultural capital as a heuristic and analytically useful concept and for its expansion beyond the confines of social class. In that respect, ethnic cultural capital, religious cultural capital, occupational cultural capital as well as social network-based cultural capital may be identified. Capitals can be identified on a continuum as Schuller, Bynner and Feinstein (2004) suggest, but there can also be various *cultural* capitals. Indeed there may be cultural capital *within* social capital. A new theory is therefore needed to accommodate this conceptual flexibility in readdressing the issue of persisting social inequalities in educational attainment.

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