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Feminization of arts participation and extracurricular activities? Gender differences in cultural capital and bullying victimization

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ABSTRACT

The study of gender differences in arts participation is extensive. Research on cultural capital often includes arts participation, but can also include participation in sports and extracurricular activities, particularly for youth in the United States. Far less research has examined the relationship between arts participation, other forms of cultural capital, and being the victim of bullying. Previous studies suggest that dominant definitions of masculinity help to explain the importance of gender in this relationship. We analyzed data from the 2002 Education Longitudinal Study to assess the extent to which male students were bullied in connection with participation in cultural activities often perceived to lack masculinity. We found that participation in clubs/academic extracurricular activities were associated with increased odds of bullying victimization for male students. On the other hand, participation in music courses was associated with increased odds of victimization for all students. Additionally, participation in varsity athletics was associated with decreased odds of victimization for all students. These findings suggest which cultural activities are stigmatized and for whom among a nationally representative sample of U.S. high school sophomores.

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1. Introduction

In the United States, bullying in high schools has received a great deal of attention by researchers and the popular media. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services sponsors a website called stopbullying.gov, indicating that bullying has become a national concern. The site defines bullying as “unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time.” Male students tend to more likely be bullies and victims in physical incidents, while females participate more in relational, social, or cyber aggression (Carrera, DePalma, and Lameiras 2011; DeVoe & Bauer, 2011). Research has found an association between victimization and factors such as academic orientations at school, atypical gender behavior, race and ethnicity, and sexuality (Morris, 2012; Mueller, James, Abrutyn, and Levin 2015; Pascoe, 2007). Certain activities, such as interscholastic sports participation, have been associated with decreased risk of bullying victimization (Peguero, 2008).

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Inequalities such as the significance conferred on masculinity relative to femininity can be reflected in the ways and reasons why students bully each other in schools. In systems of education at large, inequalities can be driven by cultural capital: the resources, tastes, and behaviors that are rewarded in schools and that are largely held by students in privileged class positions. In this manuscript, we study the potentially problematic relationship between cultural capital and bullying, asking whether participating in cultural activities that can theoretically help one's social mobility actually results in negative sanctions from other students via the enforcement of cultural codes of masculinity. Therefore, we examine the extent to which the relationship between cultural capital and bullying victimization varies by gender. Boys who participate in dance, choir, or other arts activities may be seen as less "masculine" than other male students, and research has shown that appearing less masculine can lead to negative social outcomes at school (Pascoe, 2007), including teasing and bullying victimization.

In this study we examine cultural capital in two forms – arts courses taken in school, and extracurricular (EC) activities in which students participate, both school- and non-school-affiliated – and consider how cultural capital is related to bullying victimization. The focus on gender differences in the relationship between cultural capital and bullying victimization contributes to sociological knowledge about both cultural capital and bullying victimization. Focusing on bullying extends cultural capital research by considering possible negative outcomes (such as bullying victimization) related to the embodiment of cultural capital and which forms of cultural capital are associated with victimization. This will shed light on the manifestation of gender inequalities within adolescent social life in U.S. schools.

2. Background

2.1. Cultural capital and gender

Cultural capital has been a popular topic in the sociology of education since it was first introduced by Bourdieu (1973). Cultural capital provides an explanation for why social class inequality tends to reproduce from generation to generation. Defined by Lamont and Lareau (1988:156) as "institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion," cultural capital serves to maintain the privileged position of the middle and upper classes while limiting the social mobility of the working class and poor. Children in middle- and upper-class families are socialized into the tastes, knowledge, and language styles (all components of what Bourdieu (1986) calls "embodied" cultural capital) beginning at a very young age and continuing throughout their childhood. The culture into which these children have been socialized is the same one that is used in and favored by schools, resulting in a seamless transition as these students enter the school system. Teachers tend to be high in cultural capital (DiMaggio and Useem, 1978) and may consciously or unconsciously favor students who possess cultural capital, giving them better grades and/or encouraging them to pursue higher education.

Although Bourdieu's argument was that cultural capital benefits the middle and upper classes, others have shown that cultural capital may enable individuals from the lower classes to achieve upward mobility if they can gain access to cultural capital. DiMaggio (1982) found that the grades of males whose fathers were not college educated benefitted more from cultural capital than the grades of males whose fathers had higher levels of education. He concluded that "teachers may have rewarded students from lower status backgrounds who exhibited interests and behavior expected from higher status students" (1982:198). More recently, Andersen and Jaeger (2015) used data from the Programme for International Student Assessment to show that returns to cultural capital tended to be higher in low-achieving school environments, again providing support for cultural mobility, rather than cultural reproduction.

In quantitative empirical research, cultural capital has most often been operationalized as arts participation, including taking arts lessons, participating in arts activities, or attending arts events. Many of these studies have found a positive association between arts participation and academic outcomes (see Jaeger, 2011 for a table summarizing results of past quantitative studies). For example, Kaufman and Gabler (2004) found that some types of arts participation, particularly music and dance training, were associated with college attendance. Empirical studies have also found non-academic benefits to cultural participation. Tramonte and Willms (2010) found that across 28 countries, cultural capital (both attendance at cultural events and conversations between parents and children about cultural matters) was significantly associated not only with reading test scores, but also a sense of belonging at school and occupational aspirations. In their study of high school students, Fredericks and Eccles (2005) found that students who participated in school band, drama, and/or art were less likely to use alcohol than nonparticipants.

In her study of eighth grade students, Dumais (2002) found that females had higher rates of cultural participation and received better returns to cultural capital than males; she postulated that gender socialization may encourage boys to downplay their cultural capital, especially during a time when students are developing their sexual and gender identities. Boys sometimes feel the need to protect their identities from peers' derogatory accusations that they are not masculine (Morris, 2008; Pascoe, 2007). This is similar to what scholars have called "laddish culture" where boys purposefully display "an interest in pastimes and subjects constructed as masculine" (Francis, 1999: 357) while avoiding anything that could associate them with femininity (see also Warrington, Younger, and Williams 2000). Within a school-based adolescent society, the importance of avoiding being stigmatized as feminine is far more immediate compared to the social class benefits that cultural capital can transfer to an individual. Thus, we limit our focus to gender inequality in the relationship between cultural capital and bullying victimization.

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