



The influence of habitus in the relationship between cultural capital and academic achievement

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ABSTRACT

Scholars routinely use cultural capital theory in an effort to explain class differences in academic success but often overlook the key concept of habitus. Rich, longstanding debates within the literature suggest the need for a closer examination of the individual effects of cultural capital and habitus. Drawing upon the writings of Pierre Bourdieu, I use a longitudinal dataset to examine the effects of multiple operationalizations of cultural capital on academic achievement and the mediating effects of habitus. Using first difference models to control for time-invariant unobserved characteristics, I find that typical operationalizations of cultural capital (i.e. high-arts participation and reading habits) have positive effects on GPA that are completely mediated through habitus. These results stress the importance of habitus in the relationship between cultural capital and academic achievement for disadvantaged youth.

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1. Introduction

Despite a plethora of research in the past few decades using Bourdieu's (1977a, 1984) concept of cultural capital to explain educational inequalities, researchers have shied away from the fuzzy but critically important concept of habitus. Bourdieu (1977a, p. 495) suggests that a lack of cultural capital adversely shapes the attitudes and outlooks of youth who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. This resulting negative disposition towards school, otherwise known as an individual's habitus, ultimately affects educational achievement and attainment. Although habitus plays an important mediating role in the relationship between cultural capital and academic outcomes, it has been woefully ignored in the literature.

Cultural capital research has sparked much debate among scholars: how best to operationalize and interpret Bourdieu's ideas of cultural capital (Kingston, 2001; Lareau and Weininger, 2003; Wildhagen, 2010), whether cultural capital reproduces the social structure or leads to mobility (DiMaggio, 1982; DiMaggio and Mohr, 1985), and whether the effects of cultural capital have been overstated due to omitted variable bias (Jæger, 2011). Unfortunately, scholars from all viewpoints have often neglected to include habitus in their research. Despite some evidence of the importance of habitus alongside cultural capital (Dumais, 2002), no research has provided follow-up investigation. Recent studies on habitus absent cultural capital (Horvat and Davis, 2011) and mediators of cultural capital (Wildhagen, 2009) stress the need for new attempts to operationalize and analyze habitus. Such examinations of cultural capital with habitus are long overdue and may help scholars return to the basic question of cultural capital that is critical to our understanding of educational inequality: do schools reproduce the social structure or provide a pathway to upward mobility?

In the present research, I draw upon a longitudinal dataset to examine the effects of multiple operationalizations of cultural capital on academic achievement and include habitus as a potential mediator. My primary goal is to build upon the limited work on cultural capital alongside habitus and analyze the direct and indirect effects of cultural capital as mediated

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through habitus. First, I evaluate the effects of cultural capital on GPA, paying close attention to the differences in the effects of multiple operationalizations of cultural capital, particularly high-arts participation, cultural lessons, and reading habits. Using first difference models to account for time-invariant unobserved characteristics, I establish a baseline of cultural capital effects absent habitus measures and provide some insight into the debate on operationization. I then include habitus measures and conduct mediation tests to more fully test the influence of habitus in the relationship between cultural capital and academic achievement. I conclude by reflecting on the importance of these findings within the broader cultural capital debate and stress the need to continue to incorporate habitus into education research.

2. Background and significance

2.1. Cultural capital and educational inequality

“[T]he educational system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give...[and] can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture.”

– Pierre Bourdieu, 1977a, p. 494.

Pierre Bourdieu's writings on *capital*, *habitus*, and *field* often explain inequality in an extended metaphor for life as a game (1977a,b, 1984, 1990, 1997, 1998a,b). *Capital* (social, cultural, economic, etc.) represents the resources that an individual has at her disposal that are valued in the game, *habitus* represents an individual's disposition that stems from her standing in the game or her “feel for the game” (1998b, p. 80), and a *field* represents the social world within which an individual plays a particular game. In the education *field*, students are one set of actors whose goal in the game is to meet the standards of teachers in order to move to the next level of the game (i.e. grade level or tier of schooling). To achieve success, students must use the *capital* they have received from their families, communities, and prior experiences. Proper use of *capital* typically results in success and positive feedback from teachers and also builds students' confidence, thus altering their *habitus*.

There are winners and losers in this game and Bourdieu (1977a, 1984, 1997) suggests that inequalities in capital and the resulting differences in habitus affect academic outcomes. His theory of cultural reproduction suggests that a lack of familiarity with the dominant culture (cultural capital¹) and thus the absence of the proper disposition that typically comes from such familiarity (*habitus*) serves as a barrier to upward mobility for youth from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds. He argues that the various actors in schools value certain cultural characteristics, which are conveyed through speech, attitudes, behavior, knowledge, and other interactions in the school environment. Youth from middle- and high-SES backgrounds are exposed to this cultural capital through their home life, interactions with their parents, and the various activities encouraged or organized by their parents. Cultural capital helps these youth develop the proper habitus to navigate the education system. Conversely, youth from low-SES backgrounds are not exposed to what is necessary to build cultural capital and are placed at a disadvantage when they do not display the proper habitus in school. Thus, schools reproduce inequalities based on SES because teachers and principals reward displays of dominant culture and those rewards translate into higher levels of educational achievement and attainment.

In contrast to the cultural reproduction thesis, DiMaggio and colleagues (DiMaggio, 1982; DiMaggio and Mohr, 1985) posit that cultural capital has greater benefits for youth from low-SES backgrounds. Rather than block upward mobility, cultural capital benefits low-SES youth by allowing them to better navigate the education system and interact with educational gatekeepers than they otherwise would. Cultural capital allows low-SES youth to fit into a world that values middle- and high-SES culture. Although these two theories disagree on who benefits from cultural capital there is a bounty of research throughout the literature that finds support for cultural reproduction (Aschaffenburg and Maas, 1997; Bernstein, 1977; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999), just as there is support for cultural mobility (DeGraaf et al., 2000; DiMaggio, 1982; DiMaggio and Mohr, 1985; Dumais, 2006). Thus, the first goal of the present research is to build upon these literatures by examining the effects of cultural capital and habitus for disadvantaged youth. Although data limitations prevent me from directly testing the cultural reproduction and mobility theses, I suggest that the present research lays the groundwork for future examinations of the effects of habitus by SES.

2.2. Measuring cultural capital

Previous research differs in defining and measuring cultural capital, perhaps due in part to Bourdieu's own vagueness on the topic (Lamont and Lareau, 1988; Kingston, 2001). Among the various operationalizations of cultural capital, two empirical measurements dominate the quantitative literature: high-arts participation (such as museum visits and play attendance) and time spent reading. Other quantitative work expands the operationalizations of cultural capital to include cultural classes or lessons (Dumais, 2008; Dumais and Ward, 2010; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999; Wildhagen, 2009), extracurricular activities (Cheadle, 2008; Covay and Carbonaro, 2010; Jæger, 2011), discussion of culture between child and parent (Jæger, 2009; Tramonte and Willms, 2010), teacher perceptions of habits and skills (Farkas et al., 1990; Farkas, 1996),

¹ Bourdieu (1997) suggests there are different types of cultural capital (embodied, institutionalized, and objectified), but I mean embodied cultural capital when I refer to cultural capital throughout this article. A majority of the literature to date examines only embodied cultural capital.

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