

Contemporary Social Thinkers



Pierre Bourdieu: reproducing class

Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), a French sociologist, has made important contributions to the study of education, culture and class. Bourdieu has observed underlying patterns of class domination in education, art and 'culture' generally. He suggests that the primary roles of education are social reproduction, *the maintenance of power and privilege between social classes from one generation to the next, and cultural reproduction, the process by which a society transmits dominant knowledge from one generation to another.*

In his book *Distinction* (using large-scale questionnaires on consumer activities), Bourdieu (1984) captures the profound sense of social difference and distance we often feel when faced with different cultures,



Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002)
Source: O. Nogués Alain/Corbis
Sygma

some of which may even offend our own sensitivities. He is concerned with our tastes for particular music (whether Blur or Mozart), foods (burgers or tofu), art and so forth, and with the ways items may move in and out of our scale of tastes. These can all be seen as ways of maintaining social distance and reproducing class relations.

Each family teaches its children a certain cultural capital and a certain ethos. Starting in the pre-school years, children have different access to cultural capital. For instance, children

taken by parents around the world have experiences of many different cultures with their different languages, manners, foods, arts and etiquettes. They build up experiences of travel, diversity and languages which other children may never know. Cultural capital, then, is much more than formal education; it is found often in personalities who 'know things' – about art or food or films or history – who have a stock of cultural knowledge.

Cultural reproduction, Bourdieu notes, does not involve the reproduction of the culture of all segments of society, only that of the dominant classes. People in each class transmit a distinctive 'habitus' (classifications, perceptions, ways of talking, moving and generally carrying oneself) down the generations, but schools pick up only on the habitus of the most powerful classes. He argues that the educational system has systematic biases against working-class knowledge and skills.

Source: For an introductory guide to Bourdieu, see Jenkins (1992).

Many of the world's societies have considered schooling more important for boys than for girls. Although the education gender gap has narrowed in Western countries in recent decades, many women still study traditionally feminine subjects such as literature, while men pursue mathematics and engineering. By stressing the experiences of people in traditionally masculine professions, such as the military, while ignoring the lives of other, largely female work forces, such as domestic workers, schools reinforce male dominance in society.

During the 1970s, sociologists discovered how girls were usually disadvantaged at school. Rosemary Deem demonstrated that education for girls in the past largely centred upon how it would prepare them for the family. Dale Spender found curricula riddled with 'sexism' and Sue Sharpe observed that schools steered

girls towards 'feminine' subjects. Michelle Stanworth looked at a mixed group of students, finding that teachers gave more attention to boys than to girls. As a result of such experiences, girls learned to lack faith in their abilities (Deem, 1980; Spender, 1982; Stanworth, 1983; Sharpe, 1994).

More recently, however, boys seem to be doing less well and girls doing better. Partly this is a consequence of a shift in educational policies. The National Curriculum in the UK, for example, insists that all boys have to take a language and all girls have to take a science subject; and almost all schools and universities now have equal opportunities policies. Girls in the 1990s also became less family-focused, attaching more importance to education and work (Sharpe, 1994). At the same time, the continuing development of what is commonly called a 'lads culture' and a culture of

Figure 9.1 Language and class

Language and context	Restricted code	Elaborated code
Speech forms	Small vocabulary and short, simple sentences	Large vocabulary and longer, more complex sentences
Meaning	Implicit	Explicit
Communication context	Particularistic and context bound	Universalistic and independent
Family structure	Positional	Person-centred
Class	Working	Middle

- ❶ Imagine that a parent is telling a child to switch off the television and go to bed. How would this be expressed in speech using restricted and elaborated codes?

- **Elaborated codes.** This refers to speech patterns where meanings are made explicit. People spell out fully what they mean in longer and more complex sentences. While restricted codes are *particularistic*, elaborated codes are *universalistic*. They are *context independent* and enable people who do not share a particular social situation, or who do not know each other, to communicate.

Educational success requires an ability to use elaborated codes. These are the language of instruction. Restricted codes are no use for essay-writing! Bernstein argued that while middle-class children can typically communicate in both restricted and elaborated codes, working-class children are generally accustomed to restricted codes only and are therefore likely to be less successful in education. He did, however, recognize that schools can teach elaborated codes to those who have not acquired them beforehand.

These cultural differences were linked by Bernstein to differences in class situation. Middle-class people speak in elaborated codes because their non-manual occupations require more complex verbal skills. There are also differences in family structure. Working-class families tend to be *positional* in character—that is, their members treat each other according to their position in the family. Relationships are unambiguous and can be expressed through restricted codes. Middle-class families tend to be *person-centred*. They are more individualized and relationships are worked out through discussion which involves the use of elaborated codes (Bernstein 1977).

This is an influential theory which links educational success to class culture and class situation through language rather than values and beliefs. It has been criticized for the rather crude distinctions that it makes between the middle and working classes, and for having insufficient evidence to back up its statements (Rosen 1974). Bernstein (1997) has rejected such criticisms, however, and claims that the

THEORY AND METHODS

Pierre Bourdieu

Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) was born in south-eastern France. He trained initially as a philosopher in Paris in the early 1950s. His two years as a conscript in the French army in Algeria had a major impact upon him. He was shocked by the gap between the views of Parisian intellectuals and his experiences from the Algerian war. At this time he began to move towards sociology via anthropology. In the 1960s he established himself as a leading sociologist in Paris, where he became a Professor of Sociology at the Collège de France in 1981. His best-known work on education is *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*, published in 1977. Other influential works are *Distinction* (1984) and *Homo Academicus* (1988). Richard Jenkins (1992) provides a helpful account and discussion of his life and work.

theory is supported by a large body of research carried out under his leadership.

Cultural capital

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argued that success depends not just on having appropriate language abilities but on having a broader cultural capital. Cultural capital consists of various cultural advantages that can be turned into economic gains. Bourdieu (1997) identifies three forms that it can take:

- **The embodied state.** This consists of what Bourdieu calls 'long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body'. Put crudely, this is the culture that we carry around 'in our heads'.

- *The objectified state.* This is the culture that is found in 'things', the culture that exists in possessions, such as books, or paintings, or clothing.
- *The institutionalized state.* This is typically culture as represented in qualifications.

The term 'cultural capital' is a means of highlighting the importance of culture in occupational success, for this does not just depend on material resources. Money alone cannot enable a person to become, say, a successful and high-earning architect or barrister, because examinations have to be passed and professional qualifications acquired.

Bourdieu argued that success in examinations depended on possessing the right culture. Educational standards might appear to be objectively established and unrelated to the class structure but in reality they reflected this structure. Standards of excellence in schools were established by the dominant culture of those who ruled the society. Those whose family backgrounds enabled them to acquire the dominant culture before they came to school had a hidden advantage, for they already possessed a cultural capital that enabled them to do well in examinations. In this way education simply maintained the existing class structure by asserting those from the top and excluding those from the bottom. Education led to the **reproduction of class**.

Education also maintained the class structure in another way. It legitimated inequality by making the success of upper-class children and the failure of lower-class children appear to be the result of objective procedures. Those who succeeded did so because examination procedures were stacked in their favour but it appeared as though they had superior ability. Similarly, those of lower-class

origin who failed had stood little chance of succeeding, but failure appeared to be the result of their own inadequacies. Furthermore, some did succeed, which made the system appear fair and reinforced the idea that those who failed did so because of their own failings.

Acquiring cultural capital was not just a matter of passing exams and gaining qualifications. Bourdieu argued that correct manners, the right 'taste' in, say, dress, and an appreciation of 'high culture' were all part of cultural capital. They could be crucial in determining whether someone got a high-status job or gained admission to elite circles.

A number of criticisms have been made of Bourdieu's analysis of education (Jenkins 1992: 15–19). It has been criticized for taking insufficient account of the opportunities provided by education for those of lower-class origin. It assumes that it is the legitimization of inequality by education that maintains the social order. This may not actually be the case at all and those at the bottom of society may accept inequality not because they see it as justified but because there is little that they can do about it. Bourdieu also presents a rather circular picture of class structures endlessly reproducing themselves through static cultural mechanisms. This makes social and cultural change appear almost impossible but both do happen.

Bourdieu has, none the less, provided important insights into the interrelationships between class, culture, and education. His concept of cultural capital has been widely used. There has been broad acceptance of the idea that apparently objective exam procedures actually embody the values of a dominant culture and load the dice in favour of the bearers of that culture. A similar point has been made



Acquiring 'cultural capital'? What do sociologists mean by this term?

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Frontiers Subcultural capital?

Sarah Thornton has taken up the concept of cultural capital and applied it to social success in the world of clubbing.

'Subcultural capital confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder. It affects the standing of the young in many ways like its adult equivalent. Subcultural capital can be objectified or embodied. Just as books and paintings display cultural capital in the family home, so subcultural capital is objectified in the form of fashionable haircuts and carefully assembled record collections (full of well-chosen, limited edition "white label" twelve-inches and the like). Just as cultural capital is personified in "good manners" and urbane conversation, so subcultural capital is embodied in the form of being "in the know", using (but not over-using) current slang and looking as if you were born to perform the latest dance styles. Both cultural

and subcultural capital put a premium on the "second nature" of their knowledges. Nothing depletes capital more than the sight of someone trying too hard. For example, fledgling clubbers aged 15 and 16 years old wishing to get into what they perceive as a sophisticated dance club will often reveal their inexperience by over-dressing or confusing "coolness" with an exaggerated cold blank stare.'

Source: Thornton (1997: 202-3).

- ② How do you think that subcultural capital is acquired?
- ② What kind of advantages do you think that subcultural capital confers on those who have it?
- ② Can it be converted into economic capital?

Social capital

It is not only cultural capital that matters but also social capital. Social capital is a broader notion that goes beyond the cultural advantages that aid educational and career success to those conferred by the membership of networks and the knowledge of how to use them. Although there are a number of different versions of this notion, Bourdieu's approach is again seminal and has been developed by Stephen Ball (2003a, 2003b) in his recent study of middle-class families' strategies and practices in education.

Ball takes from Bourdieu two key dimensions of social capital. The first of these is social networks, 'that is, group membership, contacts and shared identities, accumulated exchanges and obligations, and actual or potential support and access to other valued resources'. The second is what Bourdieu called 'the unceasing effort of sociability' (Ball 2003a: 82). The network provides resources but it is the interpersonal skills of sociability that actually enable the building of networks, access to them, and use of them. The knowledge and manners provided by cultural capital (see above) are here crucial to network membership and sociability.

Ball's argument is that middle-class families have far more social capital than working-class families. This is demonstrated through the competition for places in higher education and the planning of careers. The families of students from working-class backgrounds have little

knowledge of higher education and the best routes into it. The families of middle-class students have that knowledge and contacts that can help with choice of course and university, and make the right connections between higher education and professional careers.

Social capital could be especially important at times of crisis, if, for example, an exam has been failed or a student is on the edge of dropping out, and an appropriate intervention can help to restore the situation. This shows that social capital is not just something possessed but involves work, requiring the expenditure of time and effort, the investment of 'emotional capital' (Ball 2003a: 95).

Private education played an important role in the accumulation of social capital. As Ball puts it:

In effect when parents invest in private education for their children they are buying into a broad and complex body of social capital that is made available to the children and in relation to which the young people develop their own investment skills. (Ball 2003a: 86)

This brings out the links between economic capital and social capital, for it is the financial situation of the family that determines whether it can buy this social capital through private education.

The use of social capital within state education is closely linked to the development of educational policy. As we shall show in the section on 'A regulated market-place' (see pp. 348-51), the post-1980s emphasis on providing choice of school and the growth of parental involvement in the management of schools has played into the hands of those with social capital.

Educational

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The supply

Samuel Bowles' classic study of education in the United States. In Bowles' view, which capital is obedient and obediently rep. Labour could, either because force or resistance. El. workers to ac. that produce led to the reg. reproduction.

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of art, books or clothes. Finally, cultural capital is found in *institutionalized forms* such as those held in educational qualifications, which are nationally accepted and easily translated into economic capital in the labour market. It is easy to see how the embodied and institutionalized forms are acquired through education, forming resources to be used in the specific fields of social life. In this way, education can be a rich source of cultural capital, which potentially benefit many people.

However, as Bernstein, Willis and Mac an Ghaill all saw, the education system itself is *not* just a neutral field divorced from the wider society. Rather, the culture and standards within the education system reflect that society and, in doing so, schools systematically advantage those who have already acquired cultural capital in their family and through the social networks in which it is embedded (a crucial form of social capital). Middle-class children fit into the culture of schools with ease; they speak correctly, they have the right manners and they do better when it comes to exams. But because the education system is portrayed and widely perceived as being open to all on the basis of talent, many working-class children come to see themselves as intellectually inferior and accept that they, rather than the system itself, are to blame for their failure. In this way, the education system is able to play a key role in the cultural reproduction of social inequalities.

Acquiring cultural capital

In an ethnographic study of twelve diverse families in the USA, Annette Lareau (2003) drew on Bourdieu's ideas, particularly the concept of cultural capital, to conduct an 'intensive "naturalistic" observation' of parenting styles in the different cultures of family life of social classes. In the working class and poorer families, as discussed by Bernstein above, parents did not try to reason with children but told them what to do. Children were also expected to find their own forms of recreation and not to rely on

parents to create it for them. Lareau says that children from working-class backgrounds did not talk back and accepted that their financial situation imposed limits on their aspirations. Working-class parents saw a clear difference between adults and children and did not see a need to engage with children's feelings and opinions, preferring to facilitate the 'accomplishment of natural growth'. This parenting style, says Lareau, is 'out of synch' with the current standards of social institutions. But working-class parents and children still come into contact with social institutions like schools, and children therefore begin to develop a growing sense of 'distance, distrust and constraint'.

On the other hand, the middle-class children in the study were talkative, good at conversation and adept at social mores such as shaking hands and making eye contact when talking. They were also very good at getting other family members, especially parents, to serve their needs, and were comfortable with adults and authority figures, seeing themselves as their equals. Lareau argues that middle-class parents are constantly interested and involved in their children's feelings and opinions and jointly organize their leisure activities, rather than leaving them to make their own. Continual discussion between parents and children marks out the middle-class parenting style, which is based on a *concerted cultivation* of the child. The result is that the middle-class children had a clear sense of personal entitlement rather than feeling distant and constrained. What Lareau's study shows us are some of the practical ways in which cultural capital is passed on across generations and how styles of parenting are strongly linked to social class.

Lareau says that both parenting methods have their advantages, but, interestingly, some of the middle-class families she studied were exhausted by their constant efforts to fulfil their children's demands and the children themselves were more anxious and stressed than the working-class children,

whose family ties were closer and who experienced much less sibling rivalry. Lareau's conclusion is that parenting methods tend to vary much more by social class than by ethnicity and that, as several other studies have also found, the middle-class children in the study were much better prepared for success at school than were the children from working-class families.

Summary

Bourdieu's theory has been very influential in stimulating sociological research into education, inequality and the study of cultural reproduction. However, it has its critics. One criticism is that it appears almost impossible for the working classes to succeed in a middle-class education system, but, of course, a fair number do succeed. In an age of mass higher education, many more working-class people are finding their way into universities and acquiring the kinds of institutionalized cultural capital that enables them to compete with the middle classes. They do remain in the minority though. We should also not mistake the resigned acceptance by working-class children of their situation with a positive legitimization of schools and their outcomes. After all, there is ample evidence of resistance and rebellion amongst working-class pupils through truancy, bad behaviour in classrooms and the formation of school gangs which generate alternative standards of success. Nevertheless, Bourdieu's theoretical framework remains the most systematic synthesis yet produced for understanding the role of schooling in the reproduction of social inequality.

Bourdieu's view on class and social capital are discussed in more detail in chapter 11, 'Stratification and Social Class'.

Evaluation

The sociological theories explored in this chapter illustrate two important aspects of

THINKING CRITICALLY

Do you think the public school system (see opposite) is likely to survive in its present form in the age of mass higher education and the opening up of educational opportunities? If not, how might public schools have to change?

Drawing on Bourdieu's theory described above, what kinds of cultural capital do the British public schools transmit to their students?

education. On the one hand, a good quality education is something that can change people's lives for the better and in many parts of the world, children like Sakina and Hawwau are desperate to gain access to schooling as the route to a better life. In this sense, education is highly sought after and has often had to be fought for against opposition. However, on the other hand, sociological research consistently finds that education systems not only create new opportunities for advancement, but are also experienced differently by a range of social groups. Education systems cannot stand apart from the society within which they are embedded, and when society is riven with inequalities schools also help reproduce them, even against the best intentions of the people who work in them. As Bernstein, Wills and Bourdieu's works (amongst others) demonstrate, cultural reproduction in unequal societies leads to patterns of educational inequality. The next section looks at such patterns and how the changes they have undergone in recent times.

Social divisions and education

Much of our discussion of inequality so far has focused on social class, but in this section, we turn to other inequalities. We begin with an outline of a long-standing and highly contentious debate on IQ and human intelligence, before moving on to