

# Rethinking Bourdieu on Race: A Critical Review of Cultural Capital and Habitus in the Sociology of Education Qualitative Literature

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**Abstract.** Since Bourdieu introduced the terms *cultural capital* and *habitus* into the language of sociology nearly 30 years ago, research in the sociology of education has flourished in attempts to define, outline, and provide empirical support for Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction. In this paper, I provide a brief overview of the theory, and outline some of the qualitative literature (largely stemming from the work of Annette Lareau) that employs these concepts. Next, I discuss the debate over race in the literature, especially focusing on the question of whether race can properly be considered part of cultural capital. I also outline recent attempts to clarify or redefine cultural capital, which have partly arisen due to concerns over the specification of causal mechanisms. Finally, I offer a new theoretical perspective that analytically separates and redefines cultural capital and habitus, so that *cultural capital* refers to the things people 'have' (including both objectified/material cultural capital, i.e., books, and embodied cultural capital, i.e. knowledge) and *habitus* refers the things people 'do' (their regular, embodied forms of behavior). I argue that analytically separating these concepts allows us to more carefully specify and investigate causal mechanisms, provides a more fluid and less rigidly-deterministic model that can incorporate broader concepts such as race, and shifts the emphasis of empirical research to investigating the interactions between actors and institutions within given fields.

Since Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) introduced, and Bourdieu elaborated (1984), the concepts of cultural capital and habitus to the sociological discourse, research has abounded that extends, defines, elaborates, and critiques Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction, or the intergenerational transmission of class privilege. One arena in which Bourdieu worked, and which has proved particularly amenable to further research in the theory of cultural capital, is the sociology of education research. Cultural capital has been picked up by both quantitative and qualitative researchers. In the first part of this article, I outline some of the major qualitative research, elaborated primarily by Lareau and associated authors. I highlight the debates over race in this literature. I conclude with a critique of the current usage of cultural capital and habitus in the literature, and recommend what I see as a more useful strategy.

## The Legacy of Bourdieu

In *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu makes a sophisticated argument about how tastes and preferences, which seem to be individual choices, are actually determined by our access to cultural or material capital. He argues that taste functions as a marker of class (as indicated by education and social origins), and even more importantly, that there is a strong relationship between education and taste even in areas not taught in school. Thus, people don't necessarily learn (only) *content* in school, but they learn an *aesthetic disposition* toward the world. That is, educational credentialing “*formally* guarantee[s] a specific competence (like an engineering diploma) [but] *really* guarantees possession of a ‘general culture’ whose breadth is proportionate to the prestige of the qualification” (1984:25). Even further, schools reward students who bring an appropriate aesthetic disposition to the classroom, ensuring that class-privileged students will maintain their advantage through schooling. Bourdieu calls this appropriate aesthetic disposition ‘cultural capital’: it exists in an *embodied* form, “the ensemble of cultivated dispositions that are internalized by the individual through socialization and that constitute schemes of appreciation and understanding” (Swartz 1997:76), as well as an *objectified* form (possession of cultural objects) and an *institutionalized* form (educational credentials). Bourdieu invokes what he calls ‘misrecognition’ to explain acceptance of the allocation of social rewards disproportionately to the upper classes. Schools reward particular dispositions and tastes that are claimed to be ‘inborn’ or ‘natural’ – and thus randomly distributed – but are actually taught to and developed in upper-

class children by their family experiences. We believe schools distribute rewards fairly because misrecognize the true source of aesthetic dispositions.

In the United States, education has always been seen as a key to social progress, especially in light of the 'American dream' ideology of equality of opportunity. This would seem to mandate that all students have equal chances at similar-quality educations. Investigating the distribution of educational outcomes and success, sociologists of education consistently find that, no matter what measure of socioeconomic status is used, it always has an important positive effect on educational attainment (Bidwell and Friedkin 1988). There are three possible explanations:

1. Higher-status students have higher aspirations, so they work harder;
2. Higher-status students have access to better educational resources;
3. School social organization, formal and informal, bars low-status students from higher attainment.

None of these are particularly encouraging hypotheses for understanding education as the great democratizer. This research is of even greater importance due to the significant advantages that accrue to individuals with higher levels of education in the U.S.: they have higher incomes, better jobs, better family lives, higher levels of knowledge and cognitive development, political and social participation, psychological well-being, and physical health and mortality (Pallas 2000). Since the Coleman Report of 1966, researchers have also attempted to determine whether schooling *ameliorates* or *exacerbates* the intergenerational reproduction of inequalities. Knowing both *which* students attain higher levels of education, and *why*

they do so, has been a critical and primary task of education researchers. Most of this research, until the past approximately fifteen years, has been quantitative. Bourdieu's theory offers a more subtle approach, however, both theoretically (it provides another possible causal mechanism, rooted in family life) and methodologically (Bourdieu's theory has been successfully used with qualitative methods).

Annette Lareau, in particular, is associated with a major vein of qualitative educational research in the Bourdieuan tradition. Her extensive field research observing and interviewing 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students, teachers, and parents has formed the empirical basis of a large number of research articles, some coauthored, elaborating different parts of cultural capital theory. Before this research started, Lareau co-authored an article with Lamont (1988) that set forth a definition of cultural capital that has been widely cited since: "institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion" (cited in Lareau and Weininger 2003:587). Since then, Lareau has drawn on this definition. In 1999, Lareau and Horvat published a paper entitled "Moments of Social Inclusion and Exclusion: Race, Class, and Cultural Capital in Family-School Relationships." Drawing upon observations of parents and teachers, Lareau and Horvat formulated a theory that included race as a key component of cultural capital in a particular context. They found that class mediates the ways in which parents expressed concerns over schooling: some African American parents were more able than others to intervene effectively in classrooms to obtain benefits for their children.

They theorized more specifically that a history of racism and discrimination made some parents more likely or able to express concerns about schooling in angry, hostile, or aggressive terms, whereas the school emphasized openness, honesty, and positive interactions. This led them to theorize about moments of ‘social inclusion’ and ‘social exclusion’ – moments when parents’ attempts to intervene in the school succeeded or failed. This highlights the importance of the *activation* of cultural capital: people choose whether to activate their capital, and they have different levels of skills in activating it when they wish to. According to this theory, “cultural and social resources become forms of capital when they facilitate parents’ compliance with dominant standards in school interactions” (1999:42). In the school context, being white became a cultural resource that white parents unconsciously drew on.

Despite this early emphasis on the independent or mediating effect of race, Lareau’s next articles emphasized the central importance of class. In her 2002 article “Invisible Inequality: Social Class and Childrearing in Black Families and White Families”, and in a more extended version in her 2003 book *Unequal Childhood: Class, Race, and Family Life*, Lareau in fact argues that black and white families have similar childrearing practices within each class. Lareau found that both black and white working class and poor parents engage in the “accomplishment of natural growth”, providing basic necessities for their children but generally allowing children to plan their own leisure time. In contrast, black and white middle class families engage in “concerted cultivation”, a process by which parents self-consciously foster their children’s talents and abilities by managing their leisure time

through organized, supervised activities. Parents of different classes also interact with their children and with authoritative institutions (such as schools and doctors) in different ways. Working class and poor parents speak less with their children, using directives (direct orders), and seem uncomfortable demanding accommodations from authority figures. Middle class parents constantly engage their children in extended reasoning, teaching children to argue effectively for their personal benefit, and were quite comfortable negotiating with authorities for customized treatment for their children. This results in poor and working-class children learning an overall strategy of *restraint* and of middle-class children learning *entitlement*.

Furthermore, Lareau found that the instances in which race trumps class are rare. She notes in particular that middle-class black parents were aware of potential institutional discrimination (e.g., 2002:773). She also tells of middle-class black fathers' difficulty over their "inability to signal their class position in social interactions with strangers" (2003:240). She concludes, however, that class is a much more important determiner of child-rearing behaviors than is race.

Lareau's book achieved a wide critical acclaim, winning four 'best book' awards from the American Sociological Association and the American Educational Studies Association. Reviews in journals were extremely positive, too. Nevertheless, each review mentioned as a shortcoming of the book Lareau's failure to emphasize race as an important factor in shaping children's lives. Pearce, for example, asks whether "middle-class black parents make a more 'concerted' effort to teach their children strategies for dealing with racism than working-class or poor black parents" (2004:1663). This seems a reasonable question, but Lareau offers little discussion or

evidence. Similarly, Lewis asks: “[G]iven the experiences with institutional or individual-level discrimination that some Black parents discuss, perhaps Black middle-class children are developing a sense of *constrained entitlement* – one in which confrontations with racism need to be taken into account in thinking about what to expect in the world around them” (Lewis :841). Lareau does note that perhaps the children she studied were still too young to understand the implications of race in their lives. A harsher reviewer states, ““Her inattention to how class *and* race work together to produce specific configurations of inclusion and exclusion is, in my view, a serious weakness in Lareau’s analysis” (Wells 2005:393).

In fact, given Lareau’s earlier emphasis on specific moments of inclusion and exclusion, it is puzzling that she fails to discuss the interactions between class and race and the effects of such interactions on parents’ abilities to procure advantages for their children. She has not published any articles specifically addressing race issues since the article with Horvat in 1999. However, two articles in 2003 (Lareau and Weininger, and Weininger and Lareau) each focus on the importance of micro-interactional processes involved in the exchange and activation of capital. This seems to be a ripe field for discussions of race, but she does not bring it up. Weininger and Lareau (2003) focus on the parent-teacher conferences Lareau observed. They conclude that, despite an institutional arrangement designed to facilitate the sharing of information between the home and the school, there were radical differences in the effectiveness of the conferences depending on the cultural capital held by parents. “[P]arents themselves are differentially endowed with the cultural capital necessary to absorb a teacher’s message, resulting in stark

variations in the 'quantity of information' that is actually exchanged" (Weininger and Lareau 2003:384). Parents who do not fully understand educational processes and the vocabulary of the teacher are unable to 'take control' of the conference in the same way, and were left as unequal participants in the discussion. Weininger and Lareau emphasize the *interactional* processes at work that allowed middle-class parents to guide the conversation to topics of their own (rather than the teacher's) choosing: "the deftness with which the middle-class parents were able to react to the unfolding situation, whether steering the conversation in a particular direction or couching a criticism of the teacher in an innocuous sounding platitude. This 'feel for the game' likely contributes to their effectiveness, and cannot easily be inculcated" (Weininger and Lareau 2003:400). Middle-class parents are thus able to 'activate' their capital in a more effective way, obtaining benefits not just from their store of cultural capital but from how they use it in interaction.

This emphasis on interaction processes is highlighted in Lareau and Weininger 2003, in which they critically review cultural capital research and conclude that most research (especially quantitative) has strayed from Bourdieu's original intent. They emphasize the need to include "the capacity of a social class to 'impose' advantageous standards of evaluation on the educational institution" – in other words, the ability to negotiate standards to the benefit of one's children. This reformulation emphasizes "micro-interactional processes whereby individuals' strategic use of knowledge, skills, and competence comes into contact with institutionalized standards of evaluation" (2003:569). Again, this is an ideal place to discuss the interactions of race and class in terms of competencies or abilities to



'activate' capital, but Lareau and Weininger do not. Their decision is made more puzzling by recent scholarship that concludes that race is still an important factor in shaping how individuals interact in given situations.

### **Does Race Fit?<sup>1</sup>**

Debates over whether race can be reduced to class (or vice versa) are always at least lurking behind educational outcomes research. Is there something inherently important in a person's racial background, or can the differences be reduced to class differences? Some research simply blurs – or fails to distinguish – the two constructs. Horvat and Antonio (1999), for example, explored the lives of six African American girls at a mostly white private high school in California. They conclude that the girls were subject to symbolic violence because their personal or home habitus clashed with the habitus of the school. They were forced to change their behaviors, dress, or attitudes in some ways to fit in with the school environment, and felt emotional repercussions as a result. Horvat and Antonio do not, however, sort out how much of this was due to *class* differences and how much to *racial* differences. One student felt left out because she couldn't buy an expensive sweater that other (white, rich) students had; one was not presented with a car on her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday; one had to change her (Jamaican) accent when she went to school. Horvat and Antonio do not investigate poor white students at the school (or, in fact, tell whether there were any), so it is impossible to disentangle race from class. Similarly, Lewis (2003), in her book *Race in the Schoolyard*, discusses the interactional processes by which race is constructed in three very different

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase is adapted from McCall's (1992) article titled "Does Gender Fit?"

elementary schools. She, too, fails to clearly distinguish race and class. This is a difficult task, of course, because in 'real' life, race and class are conflated. There are precious few private black high schools that cater to middle- and upper-class blacks, for example; most poor schools are filled disproportionately with students of color.

Some quantitative studies find that, once enough measures of class are taken into account, race is no longer a significant predictor of academic success. Alexander and Gosa (2004), for example, outline the numerous ways in which race still matters because race points to measures of class that are not captured in income. They talk about "status crystallization": by how many criteria does one count as middle class? Most middle-class blacks are first generation middle-class, whereas most middle-class whites have middle class ties back 3 or 4 generations. Black middle-class families have less wealth, less parental and grandparental education, fewer home computers, disadvantaging household compositions, etc. "In sum, status crystallization at the high end is much less pronounced in non-disadvantaged black households than in white" (2004:6). They conclude that race still matters, but in more subtle ways than before, and due (at least partly) to underlying differences in class.

Other studies agree, finding interactional differences that affect outcomes. Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell (1999), for example, find racial differences in the distribution of cultural capital (blacks have less). Their surprising finding, however, is that blacks who do have measurable cultural capital *do not benefit* from it academically as much as whites do – in Lareau's term, perhaps they are not as skilled in activating that capital. Downey and Pribesh (2004) investigate teachers'

evaluations of students' classroom behavior. Previous research had shown that black students are rated as having poorer classroom behavior and as being less academically engaged than are white students. It was unclear, however, whether black students were rated lower because their behavior was actually worse (either 'inherently' or due to acting out in response to conflict with white teachers) or because white teachers were racist. Downey and Pribesh find that black students are rated lower as early as the first 5 weeks of kindergarten, even though previous studies have shown that all students enter kindergarten equally enthusiastic, optimistic, and eager to learn, lending support to the teacher-bias hypothesis. Similarly, Tyson (2003) notes the difficulties inherent in teaching young black students, as teachers have a difficult job in teaching black students how to be good students: they walk a fine line in the classroom, teaching students how to be successful in a racist world while trying not to devalue black culture. She finds that "mundane schooling practices convey messages of cultural deviance to black students" (2003:338), and that schools' emphasis on 'proper behavior' is often really about avoiding confirmation of racist images of blacks. Even back to MacLeod's (1987) book *Ain't No Makin' It*, there is evidence that there are racial differences that seemingly cannot be reduced to class: among boys with objectively very similar class backgrounds, black students interacted with their community and school in a very different way than white students did. In the 1995 edition of the book, MacLeod criticizes attempts to simply separate race and class: "[T]he entire quantitative quest to measure the relative importance of race and class is founded on the assumption that race and class can be reduced to one-dimensional, quantifiable factors that can

be isolated from one another” (1995:247). Of course, the outcomes were equally dismal for both black and white students, so this might be a case in which race influenced interactional strategies, but class trumped those strategies.

Reay (1995), engaging explicitly with Bourdieu’s theory, makes a claim for a *racialized and gendered habitus*. Reay advocates for more studies that utilize the concept of habitus, which she sees as a way to understand socialized, everyday practices as constitutive of the social order. This can function in two ways. First, those who are members of subordinate groups internalize particular ways of interacting, which maintain their subordination. Reay describes, for example, how groups of primary-school girls interacted with a character in a computer game. “Bess” is a servant girl who worked for the landed gentry. Reay observed the girls at the working-class school positioning themselves as Bess, and the girls at the middle-class school positioning themselves as Bess’ *mistress* while they played the game. Second, “prejudices and racial stereotypes ingrained in the habitus of members of dominant groups can affect the life chances of any group who are clearly different in some way” (1995:360) – that is, (drawing on Bourdieu), domination is an everyday practice. Reay finds evidence of this in the behaviors of the students in the classrooms she observes.

McCall (1992) also engages with Bourdieu, but more explicitly on the topic of gender. She asks whether gender ‘fits’ into a theory of cultural capital. Bourdieu seems to imply that gender is secondary to class in shaping how individuals interact in the world. By this hypothesis, gender distributes capital only *within* classes. But McCall reads Bourdieu’s passages on *embodied cultural capital* as leaving room for

an alternate hypothesis: that gender is secondary in the sense of being “hidden, unofficial, and real” (1992:842, citing some of Bourdieu’s various definitions of “secondary”). Bourdieu writes that cultural capital can have an embodied form, “long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body” (Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital”, cited in McCall 1995:843); in other words, dispositions themselves can be forms of capital. For McCall, this implies that differences in dispositions – for example, between and among men and women – can be properly considered capital. McCall argues that in order to fully understand the distribution of resources, we must look at interactions between individuals and their field: “It is clear then that it is not the *situation* that presents itself as problematic, nor is it simply the *position* of the actors. Rather, it is the disposition of actors in a very asymmetrically gendered form” (1992:846, emphasis in original). I draw on Reay’s and McCall’s emphasis on gendered and racialized dispositions in reconceptualizing cultural capital and habitus in the next section.

### **Re-thinking Cultural Capital and Habitus**

Not everyone believes cultural capital has fulfilled its theoretical promise (Kingston, 2001). Cultural capital research has, in particular, been critiqued for the lack of clarity of its causal mechanism(s). How, precisely, does attending a theatre performance translate into success in the classroom? Kingston critiques the quantitative-oriented literature that, he claims, generally fails to show causal connections. He is not alone. Lareau and Horvat (1999) indicate that:

[Previous] studies have identified cultural and social factors that contribute to educational inequality but have not advanced knowledge of the process whereby social and cultural resources are converted into educational advantages” (1999:37).

Furthermore, Kingston claims that the definition of cultural capital has expanded so much as to be essentially meaningless. For example, one study (Robinson and Garnier 1985, cited by Lareau and Weininger 2003, not by Kingston) defines cultural capital as “linguistic and cultural competence’ . . . Purchasing and borrowing books, attendance at museums, theater, concerts, styles of speech and interpersonal skills” (2003:570). How can one single concept include such various activities? And how can the causal mechanism(s) in each case be the same?

I add to this critique the question of how, precisely, each of the ‘operationalizations’ of cultural capital can clearly be seen as *capital*, in Bourdieu’s (or any other theorist’s) sense. Again, the term seems to encompass an incredible variety of things, ranging from cultural knowledge (of, especially, highbrow cultural events and ideas, but also general and specific expertise about how systems and institutions work) to preferences (e.g., aesthetic tastes) to practices (e.g., verbal facility) (Swartz 1997:75). This ambiguity began with Bourdieu and has been continued by many sociology of education researchers. Lamont and Lareau (1988), for example, developed what is probably the most widely-cited operational definition of cultural capital: “widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods, and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion” (1988:156). One of the difficulties presented by the concept is how and whether *practices* can properly be seen as a form of cultural capital. Does cultural capital simply mean possession of knowledge and expertise? Bourdieu’s own inclusion (and Lamont and Lareau’s later inclusion) of verbal facility makes this difficult; surely verbal facility is due partly to knowledge and expertise, especially

knowledge of specialized vocabularies, but also partly to a general acquired disposition and extensive *use* of such vocabularies. (For example, I would argue that this becomes clear in a case in which an actor has a great deal of knowledge or expertise that derives solely from *reading* about a subject and not from interacting with other experts. An actor who mispronounces names or terms immediately loses all cachet in the eyes of other experts.) In other words, it is not just *what* you know, but the process by which you demonstrate that knowledge, or the practices you engage in that demonstrate that knowledge. These *practices* might be more properly called *habitus*, according to Bourdieu's own definition.

*Habitus*, for Bourdieu, is a cultural theory of action (Swartz, 95), a way to tie meaningful but statistically regular individual actions to cultural power. Bourdieu saw it as a way to bridge the structure-agency divide. Swartz (95) cites Bourdieu's comment, "I can say that all of my thinking started from this point: how can behavior be regulated without being the product of obedience to rules?" In other words, how is it that groups of people can reliably be predicted to act in specific and particular ways without their actions being constantly regulated and directed from above? This is akin to the familiar sociological question of why, though it seems like chaos from the ground in Times Square, from a skyscraper looking down, individual actions appear coordinated and systematized in a very regular way. (Or, going back to Durkheim, why it is that there are statistical regularities in a decision so seemingly individualized as suicide.) How do seemingly individual decisions come together into some sort of organized structure?<sup>2</sup> Bourdieu is particularly concerned with how

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<sup>2</sup> I realize here that I am avoiding the (extremely important) question of whether such coordinated actions are determined bottom-up or top-down. Bottom-up coordination would result from actors

seemingly individual decisions vary based on the class structure of the society; he spends most of *Distinction* elaborating the ways in which these individual decisions vary based on the class location of the actor. These individual decisions can be seen as practices: “a habitus consists of the forms of behavior – beginning with bodily posture – appropriate to a given social context” (Macey 2000:175). Bourdieu defined habitus in this way:

The habitus, as a system of dispositions to a certain practice, is an objective basis for regular modes of behaviour, and thus for the regularity of modes of practice, and if practices can be predicted...this is because the effect of the habitus is that agents who are equipped with it will behave in a certain way in certain circumstances. (Bourdieu, *In Other Words: essays towards a reflexive sociology* 1990:77; cited in Reay 1995:355)

This provides a definition of habitus that focuses on what actors *do* in interaction rather than on what they *know* or *have*.

In practice, most sociological research has conflated habitus with cultural capital. Indeed, it is difficult not to, as they are so interconnected, and as Bourdieu himself did not necessarily distinguish them completely. Tierney (1999), for example, defines embodied cultural capital as “dispositions of mind and body” (1999:83), whereas Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell (1999) define it as “cultural knowledge” (1999:160). These are different things, but are used as indicators of the same construct. A more extended example is Lewis’s (2003) book *Race in the Schoolyard*. Lewis defines cultural capital to include “having a general facility for interacting appropriately in various contexts, a knowledge of and an ability to use the rules of

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making more or less individual choices that happen to coalesce into patterns across large numbers of actors/choices. Top-down coordination would result from some sort of power structure acting on individuals so that they make choices that coalesce, either by design or by convenience (‘functionality’). I think Bourdieu does have some interesting things to say on this account, and some of my comments in this paper can be seen as partly answering the question; however, there is not room here for a fuller discussion.



engagement in particular settings, general cultural knowledge relevant for and held in esteem in a particular situation, and certain kinds of possessions or credentials” (2003:170). Like Lamont and Lareau’s (1988) definition, Lewis includes ‘facility for interacting appropriately’ with ‘knowledge’. Nevertheless, Lewis claims that ‘having’ cultural capital “does not automatically translate into advantages or resources; in order to provide benefit, capital must be put to use and put to use effectively” (2003:155). I argue that this is a somewhat contradictory definition (though entirely typical of the literature): ‘cultural capital’ supposedly already includes the facility for putting cultural capital to use effectively. This results in a tautological (and ultimately deterministic) definition of cultural capital that leaves little room for a robust understanding of causal mechanisms or for change.

By reconceptualizing – or perhaps by going back to Bourdieu’s original conception of – habitus and cultural capital, we might be able to make both concepts work a bit more clearly in empirical literature and be able to make some more solid theoretical and empirical claims about how individual actions are influenced by social power structures. Specifically, I argue that we should analytically distinguish cultural capital from habitus. Cultural capital should include primarily knowledge and expertise – things actors ‘have’, however abstractly, whereas habitus should include primarily preferences and practices – things actors ‘do’. I make no claim that these can always (or ever) be distinguished in empirical work: clearly, knowledge and practice are intimately related. Bourdieu himself emphasizes the differences between (cultural) capital and habitus, as well as their inherent connections, in his summary formula (1984:101):

$$[(\text{habitus})(\text{capital}) + \text{field}] = \text{practice}$$

It is clear here that it is not simply the capital resources an actor has that determine actions or decisions, but the *interaction* between the actor's capital and habitus, and the location of those within a particular field. The equation, as Swartz (1997) points out, is not entirely clear: are we to read this literally and strictly so that "habitus and capital [are] interactive terms whereas field is additive" (1995:141), or are we simply to take the equation as an analogy, and to pay attention to all three aspects in any empirical inquiry? Putting aside the question of the precise interpretation, however, it is clear that capital can be (at least analytically) distinguished from habitus; I add here that even *cultural* capital can and should be distinguished from habitus. Indeed, separating them analytically has several clear advantages.

First, separating cultural capital from habitus will allow us to sort out causal mechanisms more clearly. According to Lareau and Weininger (2003), the current educational research relies on a definition of cultural capital that results "in studies in which the salience of cultural capital is tested by assessing whether measures of 'highbrow' cultural participation predict educational outcomes (such as grades) independently of various 'ability' measures (such as standardized test scores)" (2003:568), which they find inadequate, at least partially because measures of ability are themselves theoretically caught up in measures of cultural capital. Instead, they propose "a broader conception that stresses the micro-interactional processes through which individuals comply (or fail to comply) with the evaluative standards of dominant institutions such as schools" (2003:568). In my formulation of the concepts, such micro-interactional processes are more properly called *habitus*. This

provides a clearer causal connection between individual practices and reception in institutional arenas (fields), as well as providing clearer criteria for quantitative research. Ideally, through quantitative and especially qualitative research, we would be able to draw conclusions such as this: “When Actor X interacts with Institution Y in this particular way, this particular result obtains.”

In other words, we might say that cultural capital includes the resources individuals have, but habitus includes the uses individuals make of those resources. Lareau and Horvat (1999) discuss what they call ‘moments of exclusion’ and ‘moments of inclusion’ – times at which the efforts of parents to intervene in schools on behalf of their children fail or succeed. The *way in which* parents approach the school influences whether or not they are successful in their interventions. Lareau and Horvat observe African American families attempting to intervene on behalf of their children at a public school. They find that race mediates the ability of parents to comply with, or be successful in negotiating with, educators. Specifically, the school valued positive, polite, and supportive parent-intervention strategies, but Lareau and Horvat argue that, due to the history of racial discrimination in the school and the larger context, black parents were more likely to frame their concerns in an aggressive or angry manner. Thus, parents had differential abilities “to intervene in a fashion that the educators defined as appropriate and legitimate....Whiteness represents a largely hidden cultural resource that facilitates white parents’ compliance with the standard of deferential and positive parental involvement in school” (1999:49). Framing cultural capital in this way allows Lareau and Horvat to include race as partly constitutive of cultural capital in this particular setting. It also

allows them to elaborate a theory of *activation*. They argue that the value of capital depends on its field, and that there is an important difference between *possession* and *activation* of capital resources (1999:38). They summarize their critique of current usage of cultural capital:

In sum, the empirical work on social reproduction, despite the original theoretical richness of Bourdieu's writing, has not sufficiently recognized three important points. First, the value of capital depends heavily on the social setting (or field). Second, there is an important difference between the possession and activation of capital or resources. That is, people who have social and cultural capital may choose to activate capital or not, and they vary in the skill with which they activate it. Third, these two points come together to suggest that rather than being an overly deterministic continual process, reproduction is jagged and uneven and is continually negotiated by social actors (Lareau and Horvat 1999:38).

This focuses research on the interactions between individuals and the institutions they engage with, emphasizing structural determinants of individuals' success in activating capital. This emphasis is clearly beneficial because it allows an analytical separation between (in my terms) cultural capital and habitus. In fact, I argue that Lareau and Horvat's term *activation* is simply another way of talking about habitus.

Likewise, in a critical review of cultural capital in educational research, Lareau and Weininger (2003) develop a new, broader definition of cultural capital which they think should guide future (especially qualitative) research: "Our [new, broader definition of cultural capital] emphasizes micro-interactional processes whereby individuals' strategic use of knowledge, skills, and competence comes into contact with institutionalized standards of evaluation" (2003:569). In this article, they emphasize the dynamic relationships between students' knowledge and skills, the application of evaluative criteria, and negotiations between the family and the school. In contrast to most educational research that tries to find the benefits that accrue to students as a result of cultural capital *apart from* the students' academic

abilities, Lareau and Weininger argue for the inclusion of technical skills (including academic skills) in cultural capital. They cite Bourdieu: “ability or talent is itself the product of an investment of time and cultural capital” (“The Forms of Capital, 244; cited in Lareau and Weininger 2003:580). Again, I argue that we can separate the cultural capital of students (and define that to include technical skills) from the habitus of students, the interactional techniques students use. Lareau’s (2003) summary of Bourdieu’s theory supports this point:

Overall, Bourdieu’s work provides a dynamic model of structural inequality; it enables researchers to capture ‘moments’ of cultural and social reproduction. To understand the character of these moments, researchers need to look at the *contexts* in which capital is situated, the efforts by individuals to activate their capital, the skill with which they do so, and the institutional response to the activation of resources” (Lareau 2003:277).

Here, Lareau emphasizes studying the cultural capital held by actors as well as the skills actors bring to bear (their habitus) in activating their capital, and the structural and institutional contexts in which the interaction takes place.

Calling the micro-interactional processes *habitus* helps us sort out theoretically the differential uses of cultural capital by differently-abled actors. Not all individuals are as equally *capable* of interacting in an effective manner (as defined by the field in which they act). If we allow *habitus* to mediate between cultural capital and practice/outcome, then we make room for a more fluid model by which “behavior [can] be regulated without being the product of obedience to rules” (Bourdieu, cited in Swartz 1997:95). Specifically, we allow room for differences in ability or skill in ‘activating’ (Lareau and Horvat 1999) cultural capital effectively in a particular field. On a purely individual level, we can also allow room for personality differences between actors in the skill they desire and employ in obtaining benefits from

institutions. In a rigid, deterministic version of Bourdieu's theory (for which he has been critiqued), two people from identical social locations (or fields) would be expected to act identically in the social structure, which we all know is not true.

Furthermore, by allowing a more fluid definition of habitus and by distinguishing it from cultural capital, we can broaden the definition of habitus to include factors that are only marginally, if at all, related to cultural capital. Of primary importance with respect to this paper, we can include race and ethnicity as crucial components of habitus that mediate actors' abilities to bring their cultural capital to bear in ways that are advantageous to them in a given field. There are continuing debates in the literature over whether race is reducible to class in terms of inequalities in schooling outcomes (both attainment and achievement). If we allow the concept of habitus to cover individual interactional styles and practices, we can include race without having to make ontological or epistemological claims about the fundamentality of race versus class versus gender. Race and gender (and other 'identities') can then function as important dimensions within which actors' behavior patterns are shaped, and which mediate how and whether actors will be successful in their attempts to negotiate with institutions or be seen as meeting those institutions' evaluative criteria. This further allows the smoother integration of research on racial (and gender) differences in interaction with cultural capital research.

Most broadly, specifying habitus as an integral – but analytically separate – part of the process of cultural reproduction focuses us on *structural, interactional* analyses of individuals and institutions. It is not enough to count the books in a

family's house; instead, we must study, for example, what happens during parent-teacher conferences (as Lareau and Horvat 1999 did), what kinds of information gets exchanged, what power strategies are played out, which are successful and why. We can focus on the interactions between 'organization habitus' and 'individual habitus' and the effects of consonance and dissonance not only on attainment outcomes but also on symbolic violence felt by individuals (as Horvat and Antonio 1999 did). We can study interactions between and among students to look for how students make distinctions and develop social hierarchies in the classroom (as Reay 1995 did). This approach emphasizes the fluid and negotiable nature of most social interactions, and emphasizes the contextual nature of any interaction, while mandating that we always study structure simultaneously. In other words, it helps us continue Bourdieu's search for a way to theorize, document, and close the structure/agency divide.

## **Conclusion**

Though broad, quantitative studies have generally been successful in showing large patterns of intergenerational transmission of capital and resources, they have not been successful in specifying the causal mechanisms of transmission: just *how* does having books in one's home give one an educational benefit, and why, and do some students get more benefit out of it than others? Recent debates over the proper use of 'cultural capital', and calls by Lareau and various other authors for a greater emphasis on micro-interactional processes and on 'activation' of capital highlight another difficulty in qualitative research. I argue that habitus provides a

'way out' of these debates, by separating what actors 'have' from what they 'do' in interaction. This refocuses our investigations so that we no longer look for causal mechanisms behind vague 'cultural capital' constructs, but instead look for how actors use whatever capital they have to obtain benefits in their interactions with institutions. We will get the kind of information we need to more fully understand mechanisms of social and cultural reproduction when we more carefully specify our theoretical constructs and do qualitative research to find out *how* (and how effectively) social actors *utilize, activate, and deploy* the resources they bring to bear in different social fields.



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Bourdieu argued that the children of middle-class or wealthier parents are likely have cultural assets - knowledge, behaviour, attitudes and cultural capital. Capital is usually used to refer to money. According to Marxists, having capital gives the wealthy power. Pierre Bourdieu (a sociologist influenced by Marxist ideas) argued that it is not only money that gives the wealthy power, but cultural assets too. As such, cultural capital is not just knowing the names of classical composers or slipping into a bit of Latin (though both can be useful skills) but can also be demonstrated through much more subtle and deeply-ingrained attributes. Because teachers are often middle class themselves, they have a middle-class habitus and therefore find it easier to relate to pupils who are similar. Theory, Culture & Society caters for the resurgence of interest in culture within contemporary social science and the humanities. Building on the heritage of classical social theory, the series examines ways in which this tradition has been reshaped by a new generation of theorists. Theory, Culture & Society will also publish theoretically informed analyses of everyday life, popular culture, and new intellectual movements.

EDITOR: Mike Featherstone, Teesside Polytechnic. In: Richardson, J., Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education. Westport, CT: Greenwood: 241-258. This essay explains in detail, and in accessible way to non-specialists, the basics of Bourdieu's theory of social capital. Bourdieu's work was primarily concerned with the dynamics of power in society, and especially the diverse and subtle ways in which power is transferred and social