1. INTRODUCTION

Research into the sociology of education has paid considerable attention to how family background affects children’s educational outcomes and inequality. Among the many different aspects of family background addressed in this literature, families’ cultural resources – or their cultural ‘capital’ – have received a lot of attention. Empirical research has consistently found that indicators of cultural capital, for example the frequency of attending cultural activities, reading behaviors, and number of books in the home correlate positively with indicators of children’s educational outcomes (Davies & Rizk 2017; Farkas 2018; Jæger & Breen 2016). To explain this empirical regularity, research often draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural reproduction because it provides a comprehensive account of how cultural capital enhances educational outcomes and inequality (Bourdieu 1977, 1986, 1993; Bourdieu & Passeron 1990).

Although Bourdieu’s theory of cultural reproduction, and his concept of cultural capital, have been enormously influential in the sociology of education, they have also been subject to intense criticism. From a theoretical perspective, Bourdieu’s key concepts have been criticized for being ill defined and vague (Lamont & Lareau 1988). From an empirical perspective, critics have argued that although indicators of cultural capital correlate with educational outcomes, they do not – as hypothesized – explain socioeconomic gradients in children’s educational outcomes (Kingston 2001). Together, these criticisms have led some to question the usefulness of Bourdieu’s theory for empirical research (Sullivan 2002). Despite these criticisms, Bourdieu’s theory of cultural reproduction, and his concept of cultural capital, remain popular in the sociology of education and, I would argue, a ‘textbook explanation’ of educational inequality.

My ambition in this chapter is to reassess Bourdieu’s theory of cultural reproduction, and his concept of cultural capital, from the perspective of rigorous sociology. This ambition entails that I assess his theory, and the empirical literature that draws on it, based on its conceptual clarity, methodological rigor, and overall strength of empirical evidence. Although others have proposed ideas similar to Bourdieu (e.g., Bernstein 1961), I focus on Bourdieu because his theory has had the biggest impact in the sociology of education. My ambition in this chapter is not deconstructive: In addition to highlighting limitations in Bourdieu and the state of the art, I also address research that has attempted to clarify and redefine Bourdieu’s theoretical arguments and make his ideas empirically testable. I organize the chapter around three claims.
My first claim, also made by others (Kingston 2001; Lamont & Lareau 1988; Van de Werfhorst 2010), is that there is a fundamental lack of clarity with regard to key concepts and mechanisms in Bourdieu’s writings. This situation has led to a mushrooming of alternative interpretations of what cultural capital is and how it operates, for example focusing on concerted cultivation (Lareau 2011), cultural resources (Xu & Hampden-Thompson 2012), cultural mobility (DiMaggio 1982), and scholarly culture (Evans et al. 2014). Rather than rectifying the original source, these literatures have used parts of Bourdieu’s theory and moved in different directions. This means that Bourdieu’s original concepts remain unclear, which is unfortunate since there is widespread belief in the sociology of education that Bourdieu’s arguments are sound. To address this shortcoming, I discuss research that has sought to clarify Bourdieu’s ideas. For example, I discuss research that distinguishes the active investments parents make in transmitting their cultural capital to children from the passive transmission of cultural capital that happens due to children’s unintended exposure to parents’ cultural capital (Van Hek & Kraaykamp 2015). I also discuss research that draws on rational choice theory (see Diekmann’s chapter in this Handbook) and formal modelling to describe the process through which children accumulate cultural capital throughout childhood (Jæger & Breen 2016).

My second claim is that the lack of clarity with regard to key theoretical concepts and mechanisms has led to a lack of consensus on how we should measure them empirically. In particular, there is no consensus on how we should measure the key concept of cultural capital: does it pertain to an individual’s familiarity with ‘highbrow’ culture, reading tastes, language skills or bodily expressions? Moreover, how do we measure cultural capital, i.e., the forms of culture that operate as social assets rather than just expressions of individual tastes? The lack of attention to measurement means that, instead of developing measures with credible face and construct validity, empirical research has used indicators of cultural capital that are not clearly linked to theory. To illustrate one possible approach to measuring cultural capital (as opposed to individual cultural tastes), I discuss new survey data in which I asked respondents to assess the prestige of different cultural activities (e.g., going to the opera or to a stand-up comedy show). The idea in this approach is to measure the potential value as capital of different cultural activities. As I report, cultural activities differ considerably with regard to subjective prestige, which suggests that they have different value as cultural capital (Warde & Gayo-Cal 2009).

My third claim, which follows from the first two, is that our cumulative knowledge of what cultural capital is and how it operates is more limited than is commonly assumed. This is unfortunate for a theory that many consider a textbook explanation of inequality. An additional problem is that although most research finds indicators of cultural capital to correlate positively with educational outcomes, it remains unclear if this correlation reflects a causal relationship. The reason why is that most research relies on cross-sectional data and methods, which makes it vulnerable to bias from omitted variable and reverse causality (see Breen’s chapter on causal inference and Gangl’s chapter on longitudinal designs). For example, research shows that families that possess high amounts of cultural capital also possess other economic and social resources that enhance children’s educational outcomes. Our inability to control adequately for these resources, and our inability to allocate cultural capital via a controlled experiment (see the chapter by Gërxhani & Miller on experimental sociology), means that existing estimates of the causal effect of cultural capital on educational outcomes are likely to be inaccurate. Some studies
have used panel data or data with information on siblings or twins to control for omitted variables (e.g., Breinholt & Jæger 2020; Gaddis 2013; Jæger 2011; Jæger & Møllegaard 2017). This research suggests cultural capital has a positive effect on educational outcomes, but also that this effect is smaller than previously assumed.

Although my assessment of the current state of the art is not positive, I maintain that the concept of cultural capital, stripped of some of its ‘legacy content’, has something to offer to the sociology of education. I argue that we might use the concept of cultural capital to capture a set of non-cognitive skills (a) distributed unequally in the population, (b) transmitted from parents to children, (c) having a positive effect on educational outcomes, and (d) enhancing inequality. However, in line with core features of rigorous sociology as introduced in the chapter by Raub, De Graaf & Gërxbhani, to make cultural capital a relevant sociological explanation, we need to improve conceptual clarity, derive testable hypotheses, and use research designs that enable credible causal interpretations. I expand on these arguments in the sections that follow. I begin by presenting a minimal definition of cultural capital and the mechanisms through which Bourdieu argues that it affects educational outcomes and inequality. I label this model ‘Bourdieu classic’ (see Figure 7.1). I then discuss research, including some of my own, that has attempted to clarify and extend Bourdieu’s ideas within a framework I label ‘Bourdieu modern’. Next, I discuss the empirical state-of-the-art, focusing on what we know about intergenerational transmission of cultural capital, conversion of cultural capital in the educational system, and the role of cultural capital in shaping educational inequality. I end by discussing ways in which we might use the concept of cultural capital, or something like it, to capture a set of non-cognitive skills that, if possessed, enhance educational outcomes and inequality.

2. WHAT IS CULTURAL CAPITAL AND HOW DOES IT OPERATE?

Interpreters of Bourdieu have scrutinized his texts, written over decades, and most agree that he does not offer a clear and consistent definition of what cultural capital is and how it operates (Davies & Rizk 2017; Farkas 2018; Kingston 2001; Lamont & Lareau 1988; Lareau & Weininger 2004; Van de Werfhorst 2010). For this reason, it does not make sense to treat Bourdieu’s original texts as ‘canonical’ and to use quotations as authoritative accounts of key concepts and mechanisms. Instead, I rely on interpretations of Bourdieu and, when appropriate, use illustrative (rather than authoritative) quotations from his original texts.

Despite the lack of clarity in Bourdieu’s original texts, most interpreters agree that

![Figure 7.1 Summary of ‘Bourdieu classic’](image-url)

- Parents’ cultural capital
- Child’s cultural capital
- Educational outcomes
- Socioeconomic position

(a) 
(b) 
(c) 

Socioeconomic position

Educational system

Children's cultural capital

Educational outcomes

Socioeconomic position

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cultural capital refers to *familiarity with high-status culture and the ability to convert this familiarity into other types of privilege*. Cultural capital comes in three forms: embodied (e.g., taste and behavior), institutionalized (e.g., educational credentials) and objectified (e.g., works of art). Moreover, what counts as legitimate culture originates in the tastes and behaviors of those in advantaged socioeconomic positions, who are able to impose their tastes and behaviors as legitimate, prestigious, and desirable. Moreover, individuals who possess more cultural capital tend also to possess more economic capital (income, wealth, property, etc.) and social capital (gainful social connections).

How does cultural capital operate? Figure 7.1 summarizes the basic mechanisms in the model I label ‘Bourdieu classic’. For convenience, I assume that cultural capital is one-dimensional and that its value as a form of capital remains constant over time. bourdieu classic‘ postulates three mechanisms through which cultural capital acts to enhance inequality. All of these mechanisms must operate in conjunction for cultural capital to work. First, parents must transmit their cultural capital to children. I label this mechanism a in the figure. Second, children must convert their embodied cultural capital into institutionalized cultural capital, for example higher academic achievement, final attainment, or credentials from elite educational institutions (arrow b). Third, children must convert their institutionalized cultural capital into a higher socioeconomic position (arrow c), thereby completing the process of social reproduction.

2.1 Intergenerational Transmission of Cultural Capital

The first necessary condition in ‘Bourdieu classic’ is that parents transmit cultural capital to children. Bourdieu does not describe how this process takes place. Moreover, he does not make it clear if parents make deliberate cost-benefit calculations when attempting to transmit their cultural capital to children or if intergenerational transmission happens unconsciously. Research documents positive correlations between indicators of parents and children’s cultural capital, for example their participation in ‘highbrow’ cultural activities (Kraaykamp & Van Eijck 2010; Van Eijck 1997), reading and television habits (Notten et al. 2012), music preferences (Ter Bogt et al. 2011; Willekens & Lievens 2014), and other lifestyle characteristics (Nagel & Lemel 2019; Yaish & Katz-Gerro 2012). Although consistent with ‘Bourdieu classic’, these correlations do not tell us if intergenerational transmission of cultural capital is the result of parents’ active investments in transmitting their cultural capital or children’s passive exposure to cultural capital. one study that has addressed this limitation is Van Hek & Kraaykamp (2015), who distinguish between parents actively guiding their children’s cultural behaviors and passively setting ‘good’ examples of cultural practices children can follow. They show that indicators of

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1 A literature exists which addresses ‘emerging’ forms of cultural capital and how the legitimacy of different cultural activities, genres, and objects changes over time (Bellavance 2008; Friedman & Reeves 2020; Prieur & Savage 2013).

2 An even more fundamental question is whether intergenerational transmission of cultural capital is mainly due to genetic or environmental factors (see the chapter by Mills on sociogenomics). Research on cultural capital generally assumes that family environments explain intergenerational transmission of cultural capital. As part of an ongoing project, I have collected data on monozygotic and dizygotic twins’ cultural tastes and behaviors. Preliminary results suggest that shared genetic factors account for a large share of the total variance in cultural tastes and behaviors. These findings challenge the usual assumption that intergenerational transmission of cultural capital predominantly originates in family environments.
parents’ active guidance correlate more strongly with children’s cultural behaviors than indicators of parents’ own behaviors (proxies for ‘good’ examples). One important takeaway from this research is that active investments appear to be more important than passive exposure.

I have addressed the same issue in a formal model that describes the processes through which parents transmit cultural capital to children (Jæger & Breen 2016). I think of this model as an attempt at developing a ‘Bourdieu modern’ approach that uses the principles of rigorous sociology to explicate and formalize ideas in ‘Bourdieu classic’. This model, which draws on related work in economics (Bisin & Verdier 2011; Cunha & Heckman 2008), treats childhood as consisting of $T$ periods (with $t_0$ being birth) in which parents transmit some of their cultural capital to children. Similar to van Hek & Kraaykamp (2015), Jæger & Breen (2016) argue that intergenerational transmission of cultural capital in each period depends on parents’ efforts at actively transmitting cultural capital to children and on children’s passive exposure to cultural capital in the home. We test this idea using panel data from the US and find that parents’ active investments in children’s cultural capital (proxied by, for example, how often parents take the child to a museum), and their passive cultural capital (proxied by, for example, whether parents subscribe to a daily newspaper), both have independent, positive effects on children’s cultural capital. These results, along with those of van Hek & Kraaykamp (2015), suggest that we should distinguish between active investments and passive exposure. Moreover, our model hypothesizes that children’s stock of cultural capital in period $t$ has a positive effect on their stock in period $t+1$, capturing that, like money in the bank, an early stock of cultural capital accrues interest over time. We motivate this argument from evidence that early endowments of skills (cognitive and non-cognitive) leads to a greater accumulation of these skills over time (Cunha & Heckman 2008). We test this idea and find that children’s cultural capital in period $t$ has a positive effect on their cultural capital in period $t+1$.

How do parents decide how much of their cultural capital to invest in children? Bourdieu does not explain (if or) how parents’ beliefs about the costs and benefits of investing in cultural capital influence their behaviors. To address this theoretical gap, our model treats parents as ‘utility maximizers’ who, in light of their beliefs about the future returns to investing in children’s cultural capital, attempt to transmit as much as possible of their cultural capital to children (see Diekmann’s chapter). This approach is unusual in the sociology of education, but we argue that it provides a useful starting point for thinking about intergenerational transmission of cultural capital. Our model hypothesizes that parents weigh the benefits of investing in cultural capital against the costs of these investments (direct costs such as time and money, and indirect costs such as not being able to make other investments in the same period). We provide a crude test of this idea and find that parents’ active investments in their children’s cultural capital in period $t$ depends on the child’s academic performance (measured by a test score) in period $t-1$. In other words, if the child performed better than expected (relative to its average performance) in period $t-1$, parents provide higher investments in period $t$. Conversely, if the child performed worse than expected in period $t-1$, parents provide lower investments in period $t$. These results are consistent with the idea that, rather than unconsciously

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3 In the model, we do not explain where parents’ beliefs come from. Differences in parents’ beliefs might arise from, for example family background, institutions (such as schools), and personal experience.
reproducing behaviors passed down from their own parents, parents use information on the outcomes of past investments to inform current investments. An important limitation in our model is that it does not address if other actors, in particular children and teachers, also act as utility maximizers. This would seem like a reasonable assumption in light of Bourdieu’s view of society as a ‘social battleground’. In future research, we would like to use the framework of utility maximization to address how children, in addition to parents, use cultural capital to enhance their relative position within a competitive schooling environment and how teachers decide on how to allocate resources based on students’ displays of cultural capital. Research on decision-making processes (Bruch & Feinberg 2017) and social interactions (Durlauf & Ioannides 2010) might provide a useful starting point for this research.

2.2 Converting Cultural Capital into Educational Outcomes

The second necessary condition in ‘Bourdieu classic’ is that, once acquired from parents, children must convert their cultural capital into favorable educational outcomes in the educational system (illustrated by Arrow b in the figure). According to Bourdieu, the educational system valorizes cultural capital, with teachers and other institutional gatekeepers ascribing positive qualities such as academic brilliance onto those that possess it (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron 1990). This is unfair because, rather than reflecting real skills, cultural capital simply reflects the arbitrary cultural tastes of those who hold power.

What counts as cultural capital? There is little evidence on this topic because most research accepts Bourdieu’s assumption that cultural objects, genres, and activities map onto a cultural hierarchy that distinguishes highbrow (i.e., legitimate and high-status) and lowbrow (i.e., illegitimate and low-status) forms of culture. To address the idea that forms of culture have different value, I collected new survey data in Denmark in which I asked respondents to rate the prestige of 12 cultural activities on a scale from 1–5 (with higher values indicating higher prestige). Although the number of cultural activities I include is low, the idea is to assess if cultural activities often considered highbrow (and thus more valuable as cultural capital) or lowbrow (and thus less valuable) differ systematically with regard to popular prestige. Table 7.1 summarizes mean prestige for the 12 cultural activities included in my data.

The table shows that respondents rate activities often considered highbrow (e.g., opera, ballet, and classical concert) to have the highest overall prestige. Moreover, they rate activities often considered lowbrow (e.g., going to a flea market, amusement park, or to a movie at the cinema) to have the lowest prestige. Some activities, for example going to a museum, the theater, and a musical, are located between these extremes, suggesting a ‘middlebrow’ position. The difference in mean ratings when comparing the highest (opera) and lowest (flea market) prestige rating is around three standard deviations, which suggests that there is considerable empirical variation in popular perceptions of the prestige of different cultural activities. Although illustrative, these findings suggest that cultural activities have different value in terms of their prestige and legitimacy.

I now return to the question of how children convert embodied cultural capital into institutionalized cultural capital. In ‘Bourdieu classic’, teachers and other gatekeepers play a crucial role because they are the institutional catalysts through which children
convert cultural capital into educational outcomes. Without them, cultural capital has no value. Three literatures, each with a different focus, have analyzed how children convert cultural capital into educational outcomes.

The first literature estimates associations between indicators of children’s cultural capital and indicators of their educational outcomes (typically grades and test scores). This literature typically finds positive associations between cultural capital and educational outcomes, which are then interpreted as arising from institutionalized bias in favor of cultural capital (for a review, see Jæger & Breen 2016). This literature is uninformative about how children convert cultural capital into educational outcomes because it does not address teachers.

The second literature tests directly Bourdieu’s argument that children’s display of embodied cultural capital biases teachers. This literature estimates associations between indicators of children’s cultural capital and indicators of teachers’ perceptions of children’s academic skills. As most studies in this literature also include an observed measure of children’s academic skills, the idea is to compare children who have the same observed skills but different amounts of cultural capital. Results from this literature are inconclusive, with some studies finding a positive association between children’s cultural capital and teacher perceptions (Dumais 2006; Farkas et al. 1990; Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell 1999) and others finding no association (Bodovski & Farkas, 2008; Takei et al. 1998; Wildhagen 2009). As almost all research uses cross-sectional data, bias from omitted variables might help to explain the lack of clear results. A few studies have addressed bias from omitted variables. In Breinholt & Jæger (2020), my co-author and I use three-wave panel data from the US and find that, net of individual fixed effects and observed indicators of children’s academic skills, children’s cultural capital has no effect on teachers’ perceptions of children’s skills in English and math. In Jæger & Mollegaard (2017), my co-author and I use data on monozygotic (MZ) twins from Denmark to compare the effect of cultural capital on respectively teacher-awarded and exam grades in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural activity</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opera</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ballet/dance show</td>
<td>4.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classical concert</td>
<td>4.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art museum</td>
<td>3.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play (theater)</td>
<td>3.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musical</td>
<td>3.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rock or pop concert</td>
<td>2.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stand-up comedy show</td>
<td>1.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amusement park</td>
<td>1.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movie at the cinema</td>
<td>1.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Techno, dance, hip-hop or rap concert</td>
<td>1.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flea market or cattle show</td>
<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $N = 2,760$ (the dataset, which was collected in 2019, is comprised of Danish same-sex twins born in the cohorts 1985–2000 and their non-twin siblings). All means in the table are statistically significantly different at $p < 0.05$ except those marked in italics.
the same topics (Danish, math, English and science). We argue that teacher-awarded grades are more prone to bias from cultural capital because children expose teachers to cultural capital throughout the school year, while anonymous assessors who never meet the child (along with teachers) award exam grades. Net of MZ twin fixed effects, we find no evidence that cultural capital has a stronger effect on teacher-awarded grades than on exam grades. Overall, the literature provides little support for the assumption in ‘Bourdieu classic’ that teacher bias is the mechanism through which children convert cultural capital into educational outcomes.

The third literature analyzes institutional variation in the ways in which family background (of which cultural capital is a key component) affects educational outcomes. Although this literature does not address cultural capital directly, it is relevant because we may use it to form hypotheses of how cultural capital might operate in different educational systems (Andersen & Jæger 2015; Esser & Seuring 2020; Van de Werfhorst & Mijs 2010). In particular, in educational systems with early tracking (such as Germany) cultural capital might be more important in affecting teachers’ recommendations of which track children should be admitted to (e.g., academic vs. vocational) than in affecting teachers’ perceptions of children’s skills (Geven et al. 2018). On the other hand, in comprehensive educational systems (such as the US) cultural capital might be more important in molding teachers’ perceptions of children throughout the school year to maximize teacher bias and inputs, which in turn enhance children’s educational performance (grades, test scores etc.). These hypotheses are purely speculative, and we need carefully designed comparative research to determine if cultural capital operates differently across educational systems.

2.3 Cultural Capital and Inequality

The third necessary condition in ‘Bourdieu classic’ is that institutionalized cultural capital, in the form of educational degrees and credentials, leads to a higher socioeconomic position (as measured by, for example, higher income, wealth, or social class position). I illustrate this idea by Arrow c in Figure 7.1. The mechanics in ‘Bourdieu classic’ are simple: those with more cultural capital achieve more education, and those with more education reach a higher socioeconomic position. In this model, cultural capital does not have a direct impact on socioeconomic position; instead, its impact runs exclusively via education (as shown in the figure). What do we know about the empirical credibility of this model? A vast literature in labor economics finds that education has a direct, positive effect on labor market outcomes such as wages and income (Card 1999; Heckman et al. 2018). Unfortunately, we cannot use this finding to infer that cultural capital (via education) leads to a higher socioeconomic position. The reason why is that a positive effect of education on labor market outcomes might arise from many other determinants of education than cultural capital (e.g., cognitive skills, experience, and social networks). To demonstrate that cultural capital matters, we would need to isolate variation in educational outcomes that is attributable to cultural capital and show that this variation affects socioeconomic position. One possible way of addressing this idea would be to use a natural experiment (say, a policy or regime change) that allocates cultural capital randomly to individuals or families (Fishman & Lizardo 2013; Nagel et al. 2010). Combined with instrumental variable methods, we might then use the exogenous variation induced
by the natural experiment to (a) estimate the effect of cultural capital on educational outcomes, (b) estimate the effect of education and socioeconomic position (see Chapter 15 on causal inference), and (c) calculate the indirect effect of cultural capital on socioeconomic position that operates via education. I am not aware of any research that has used this type of approach.

Overall, we do not know much about the role of cultural capital in shaping inequality. This is unfortunately because explaining inequality is a key motivation behind ‘Bourdieu classic’. From the perspective of rigorous sociology, we also want to link cultural capital at the micro level (i.e., parents’ investments and children’s conversion of cultural capital) to its impacts at the macro level (i.e., aggregate patterns of inequality; see the chapter by Raub, De Graaf & Gërshani). Existing research has linked cultural capital and inequality in two ways.

The first approach builds on Bourdieu’s (1984) finding in Distinction that those in advantaged socioeconomic positions exhibit highbrow cultural (high-capital) lifestyles, while those in disadvantaged positions exhibit lowbrow (low-capital) lifestyles. This empirical association, along with the positive correlation in cultural capital between parents and children, lead to the intuitive (but empirically unfounded) conclusion that inequality in the distribution of cultural capital explains inequality in the distribution of socioeconomic position (i.e., high socioeconomic position [parents] → high cultural capital [parents] → high cultural capital [children] → high education/socioeconomic position [children]).

The second approach uses regression methods to estimate the extent to which empirical indicators of cultural capital mediate the observed socioeconomic gradient in educational outcomes (for a review, see Jæger & Breen 2016). Drawing on mediation analysis, the idea is to assess the extent to which cultural capital explains the socioeconomic gradient in educational outcomes. Results from this research suggest that cultural capital mediates only a minor share of the socioeconomic gradient in educational outcomes, as judged by the reduction in the association between socioeconomic position and children’s educational outcomes (or change in $R^2$) from including indicators of cultural capital.

One possible takeaway from existing research is that cultural capital does not matter much for educational inequality. However, this conclusion might be premature in light of the dearth of research that directly addresses inequality. In Jæger & Karlson (2018), my co-author and I use a counterfactual approach and ask what would happen to educational inequality if we change the distribution of cultural capital in the population and the propensity for parents in different socioeconomic groups to provide different cultural capital inputs to their children. We use data from the US to estimate the baseline socioeconomic gradient in children’s educational outcomes, as measured by the difference in the average years of completed schooling for children whose parents belong to a high or a low socioeconomic group, respectively. We estimate the baseline gradient to be around 1.3 years of schooling. We then analyze how this gradient would change if we hypothetically changed the cultural capital inputs that parents in each socioeconomic group provide to their children. For example, we analyze what would happen if a higher share of parents in the low socioeconomic group adopted the (higher) cultural capital inputs we observe in the high socioeconomic group (and vice versa). We think of this counterfactual approach as emulating interventions or policies that redistribute cultural capital inputs in the population. Our counterfactual analyses show that the baseline gradient in
children’s educational outcomes would decrease if we increase the share of parents in the low socioeconomic group that provides the higher inputs we observe in the high socioeconomic group (a scenario we label ‘Equalization from below’). Specifically, we estimate that the socioeconomic gradient would decrease by 16 percent if we increase the share of parents in the low socioeconomic group that provide high cultural capital inputs by ten percentage points. Interestingly, we do not observe the same equalizing effect if, instead of increasing cultural capital inputs in the low socioeconomic group, we decrease inputs in the high socioeconomic group (we label this scenario ‘Equalization from above’). In this scenario, a reduction in the share of parents in the high socioeconomic group that provides high cultural capital inputs by ten percentage points would lead to a reduction in the baseline socioeconomic gradient of only 4 percent. We speculate that the asymmetry in the equalizing effect is due to parents in the high socioeconomic group possessing other resources (for example, economic or social capital) that enable them to compensate for lower cultural capital inputs. Although speculative in many regards, our counterfactual analysis suggests that the unequal distribution of cultural capital in the population, and the unequal propensity for parents to use it, might shape aggregate inequality.

3. WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

I end the chapter by discussing how research in the sociology of education that draws on Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital might proceed. ‘Bourdieu classic’ assumes that parents transmit cultural capital to children, children convert cultural capital into educational outcomes, and children convert educational outcomes into a favorable socioeconomic position. As I have argued throughout this chapter, each mechanism lacks theoretical clarity and, in many cases, empirical support. How should we assess the overall state of the art? I address this question from the perspective of sociological science and public policy.

3.1 Scientific Perspectives

Although ‘Bourdieu classic’ is an underperforming explanation, we do know a few things from existing research. First, we know that children acquire cultural tastes and behaviors from their parents and that these tastes and behaviors have different value as cultural capital. Second, we know that teachers do not perceive children who possess more cultural capital to be more academically gifted than those who possess less cultural capital. Third, we know that cultural capital (as measured by, for example, indicators of cultural activities, reading, and extracurricular activities) has a positive effect on a wide variety of educational outcomes (Gaddis 2013; Jæger 2011; Jæger & Breen 2016; Jæger & Møllegaard 2017). How can we use these findings to infer about the role of cultural capital in explaining educational outcomes and inequality?

Instead of thinking about cultural capital as a false signal of academic brilliance, as in ‘Bourdieu classic’, it might be more useful to think about it as a real (as opposed to symbolic) asset. From this perspective, cultural capital comprises a set of non-cognitive skills, with non-cognitive skills defined as ‘patterns of thought, feeling and behavior’ (Almlund
et al. 2011; Borghans et al. 2008, p. 974). In this perspective, children’s cultural capital manifests in, for example, creativity, academic confidence, and persistence. These skills are different from, but most likely positively correlated with, ‘traditional’ cognitive skills (e.g., processing capacity, working memory, and reasoning), and they also provide distinct advantages in the educational system. For example, research shows that, compared with children from disadvantaged families, children from advantaged families are more confident and better able to command attention and negotiate advantages in the classroom, which leads to more teacher inputs and better learning opportunities (Calarco 2014, 2018; Lareau 2011). In Jæger & Møllegaard (2017), my co-author and I find that while indicators of cultural capital are mostly unrelated to children’s academic achievement in Denmark, they do have a positive effect on the likelihood of pursuing secondary education (the college-bound track in Danish secondary education). If we think about cultural capital as one (among several) set(s) of non-cognitive skills – instead of thinking about them as something special (as in ‘Bourdieu classic’) – we might expand the repertoire of how we can use the concept of cultural capital. As I argue in the introduction, we might treat cultural capital as a set of non-cognitive skills unequally distributed in the population, transmitted from parents to children, having a positive effect on educational outcomes, and enhancing inequality. This approach does not hinge on the assumption of a ‘rigged’ educational system, and the measurement of cultural capital would be easier as there is a lot of research on non-cognitive skills to draw on. In many ways, existing research already treats cultural capital in this manner. For example, DiMaggio (1982) argued that cultural capital is an individual resource that, rather than benefiting mainly those in advantaged positions, might facilitate upward mobility for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Similarly, Xu & Hampden-Thompson (2012) argue that cultural capital is a universal cultural resource that, if possessed, benefits everyone. Consequently, letting go of (some of) the legacy content of ‘Bourdieu classic’ to improve conceptual clarity, and applying methodological rigor in empirical research is, I believe, the way forward.

3.2 Policy Perspectives

Intellectual debates on Bourdieu have had a bigger impact on academic research than on public policy. A likely explanation is that the obtuseness of Bourdieu’s writings, and the lack of clear empirical evidence, has made it difficult to offer clear policy advice. This is unfortunate as cultural capital, conceptualized as, for example, creativity, academic confidence, and persistence is clearly relevant for policy intended to reduce inequality.4

Based on what we know, what would sound policy advice look like? Can we redistribute, or perhaps foster, cultural capital to reduce inequality? In Jæger & Karlson (2018), we explore what would happen to inequality if we redistribute cultural capital inputs between parents belonging to a high or to a low socioeconomic group. Here, we emulate policies that change the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital. Another option would

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4 Backed by experimental evidence, economists have been successful in raising public awareness of the importance of non-cognitive skills in shaping individual educational and labor market outcomes (Almlund et al. 2011; Cunha & Heckman 2010). There is no reason why sociologists could not use the concept of cultural capital to add to this awareness.
be to design policies that foster cultural capital. We have some evidence on interventions that target children. For example, Nagel et al. (2010) use a policy reform in the Netherlands that introduced a mandatory arts course (attendance at cultural events such as theatre, concerts and museums) in secondary school to analyze if ‘injecting’ cultural experiences has a positive effect on students’ interest in culture. Results based on follow-ups two, four and six years later show that, compared with a pre-reform control group, the arts course did not increase students’ cultural participation and their long-term interest in the arts. Kisida et al. (2014) design a field experiment in which they randomly assign groups of students to an arts program offered by a local museum (with students in the control group getting the arts program at a later point in time). They analyze the effect of the arts program on students’ interest in the arts (measured three weeks after the program) and find that the arts program has a positive effect on students’ interest in the arts, especially among students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In follow-up analyses, they find that students who attended the arts program, and participants in new interventions, exhibited better critical thinking and social skills and better academic performance (Bowen et al. 2013; Erickson et al. 2020; Greene et al. 2018). These results suggest that policy interventions might foster the types of non-cognitive skills that I consider cultural capital. We need more experimental research like this, and research that outlines the mechanisms through which children acquire and use cultural capital in diverse settings, to make cultural capital a better sociological explanation of educational inequality.

REFERENCES


Bodovski, K. and G. Farkas (2008), “‘Concerted cultivation” and unequal achievement in elementary school’, Social Science Research, 37, 903–919.


