

MUSICAL TASTE AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

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ABSTRACT

Background. During everyday interactions we seek to establish new social ties or confirm existing ones using manifest signs of life styles. The ways we behave in certain situations, language codes, common interests, and shared repertoires of cultural preferences serve as resources with which we create mutual respect while excluding those who lack these cultural prerequisites. Since music is one element within this repertoire, it contributes to social exclusion. Or, as the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu stated: Musical taste as well as other cultural preferences is used as cultural capital in order to control access to high status positions.

Aims and methods. Using data from a representative survey of the German population in 1998 (ALLBUS 1998), the paper will examine two main theses:

First, cultural capital is not only expected to be a good that children from high status families “inherit” from their parents, but also, one which upwardly mobile persons acquire during secondary socialization. Hence, the extension of secondary education has broadened the opportunity to acquire cultural capital.

Second, the transformation of the German postwar society has changed the form of cultural capital itself. The orientation on high culture has lost its significance. In a situation of devaluation of traditional cultural hierarchies, the crossing of cultural boundaries between high brow and low brow seems to be more and more a prerequisite for status attainment.

Results and Conclusions. While Bourdieu’s central thesis that cultural capital is used in the production and reproduction of social inequalities can be confirmed, nonetheless, the following modifications will be proposed: First, as a result of the expansion of secondary education, the opportunity for acquisition of cultural capital has been extended. Therefore, Bourdieu’s reproduction thesis is complemented by a mobility thesis. Second, social exclusion not mainly depends on symbolic exclusion but on the ability to step over symbolic boundaries.

1. CULTURAL CAPITAL AND MUSICAL TASTE

Ever since Pierre Bourdieu’s and Jean-Claude Passeron’s early work on social reproduction in education (Bourdieu and Passeron 1971), the term cultural capital has been very popular in sociology as well as in other disciplines and even in *feuilletons* and dinner conversations. But what does cultural capital mean?

1.1 Cultural capital as manifest signs and the reproduction of social inequalities

There is a wide range of definitions for cultural capital depending on the background and interest of the scholars using this term. Those interested in the significance of education in the modern world use it as a synonym for what economists call “human capital,” which comprises knowledge, skills, and competences. Although Bourdieu and Passeron suggest such a definition, it touches on only one dimension. Cultural capital is more than the skills required by the labor markets of modern societies. It is a general disposition to all aspects of life, an entire habitus (Bourdieu 1987). In this sense it is better translated as cultivation or sophistication.

These aspects have been described in terms of cognitive and evaluative competences (e.g., codes which enable us to appreciate artworks), preferences (for high culture) as well as skills and practices (playing piano or golf). I’d like to highlight the expressive function of cultural capital in everyday interactions. Our cultural preferences, our interests, the knowledge about cultural issues and the way we talk about them, are “read” all together as a manifest sign of cultivation. Gerhard Schulze refers in his analysis of lifestyles to gestalt-perception (Schulze 1992): In daily encounters we add the single components of one’s lifestyle to a gestalt and assign it to a class of similar objects. We organize our social ties on the basis of these classifications. Similarities in lifestyles increase the chance of mutual respect and therefore of reciprocal commitments.

But why cultural *capital*? Why the economic metaphor? Cultural capital, as Bourdieu states, similar to money, provides access to privileges. As a large amount of money offers the possibility of a high status living, cultural capital facilitates the achievement of highly esteemed positions and – although not necessarily – a better income. It helps establish ties to gatekeepers who provide important information, assistance, jobs, power, etc. Let me give you some examples of how cultural capital works in the process of educational and status attainment. The U.S.-American sociologists Paul DiMaggio and John Mohr (DiMaggio and Mohr 1985) examined the thesis that children with interests and activities in high culture obtain more support from their teachers than those who do not show these interests regardless – which is the crucial point – of their cognitive ability (although it is not easy to find appropriate instruments for the measurement of ability and cultural capital). The results questioned a meritocratic ideology, which states that only ability is decisive for educational attainment. Recent, more qualitative studies of elites have revealed the central role of cultural resources in the reproduction of the elite. Managers in large corporations as well as professionals

emphasize the cultural criteria with which they assess persons to whom they maintain social ties (Lamont 1992). And Michael Hartmann has studied cultural aspects of the acquisition process of top managers in German Industry (Hartmann 1996). Insofar, cultural capital, in addition to the competences and titles we acquire during education, is a resource in the process of status-attainment and the reproduction of social inequalities.

But there are two implications of Bourdieu's theory which have been challenged by recent research:

First, Bourdieu assumes that the basis for the accumulation of cultural capital is acquired in early childhood experiences with high culture. Therefore, children of educated families are advantaged in the further status attainment process as compared to children of families with a lower educational background. In contrast to Bourdieu's reproduction thesis, which suggests a strong influence of family background on status attainment, it was argued that secondary and higher education provides the basis for the appropriation of cultural capital for children from lower status families (DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; Gebesmair 2001). The original reproduction model was complemented by a mobility model which takes into account the fact that more and more children are given access to higher education and therefore to a broader variety of cultural influences. Without going into details of the debate on the existing inequalities of access, it should be mentioned that especially children of less highly educated employees and public officials have benefited from this expansion whereas working class children are still underrepresented in the gymnasium and at the university. Nevertheless, if the thesis holds true that higher education provides the opportunity for the acquisition of cultural capital we will expect upwardly mobile persons and non-mobile persons with the same educational achievements to have similar preferences for high culture.

Second, Bourdieu defines cultural capital as opposed to popular culture. The value of cultural capital is greater the more a person is oriented to traditional high culture. But recent studies have revealed that persons with a higher status show familiarity with a wider range of diverse cultural forms as compared with persons of a lower status. While an exclusive affinity towards low culture remains an obstacle for attaining a higher status, high brow snobbery has also lost significance as cultural capital. In a situation of declining cultural hierarchies, the crossing of cultural boundaries between high and low seems to be the prerequisite for social mobility and status attainment. Hence, differences between social classes are less represented in differences of preferred cultural forms than in different scales of preferences. Persons with a higher status like more musical genres than those with a lower status – moving beyond the traditional distinction between high culture and low culture (Peterson 1992).

There are different reasons for this transformation. The expansion of secondary education and the availability of high culture via mass media and cultural institutions have devalued what was formerly an exclusive cultural capital. Furthermore, with the advent of rock music in the 1950s and 60s and its mass-media distribution, a culture was established which targeted youth as a class-less social subgroup. The post war cohorts integrated aspects of popular culture into their lifestyles regardless of their family background.

If these theses hold true, we expect younger cohorts from the "educated class" to have preferences that embrace high culture as well as popular culture while the older cohorts remain oriented mainly on traditional high culture. Furthermore, we will try to assess the independent effect of this new cultural capital on status attainment.

1.2 Musical taste as an indicator for cultural capital

In order to test the hypotheses, I used data from the ALLBUS 1998. ALLBUS is a bi-annual General Social Survey using a representative sample of the adult German population and variable questionnaires. It is carried out and made available to all interested scholars by GESIS (Gesellschaft für sozialwissenschaftliche Infrastruktureinrichtungen).

The 1998 questionnaire included, among others, questions on cultural practices and musical preferences. People were asked to rate five very global musical genres (see Table 1) from 1 "I like to listen to it very much" to 5 "I don't like to listen to it." Are these ratings appropriate indicators for cultural capital? Let me justify these measurements.

Firstly, I have defined cultural capital as manifest signs in accordance to Schulze's definition of lifestyles. Of course, musical taste is only one component in a complex lifestyle. But a recent comparison of different lifestyle studies has shown that four of these musical genres form fairly accurate items on scales created to identify basic aesthetical schemata (Müller-Schneider 2000). They represent three basic dimensions of the stylization of life.

[Link to life styles](#)

Secondly, I am not interested in the question of the exact kind of music that is preferred and how often and how long one listens to it. Instead, I suggest that music is used in everyday interactions to signal a general disposition, although it is unlikely that a verbal expression of interests is unrelated to any experience with music and a respective practice. Renate Müller has pointed to the fact that ratings of verbal designations of musical genres in questionnaires is an appropriate instrument to study the social use of music, while investigations with sound examples provide deeper insights into personal experiences (Müller 1995).

Before moving on to the results of our analysis, I'd like to touch on a methodological problem that could be a basic objection to my research design. I began with the assumption that cultural capital that had been acquired in the previous educational process facilitates the subsequent status attainment process. But we only have measurements of status and cultural capital for the time when the survey was carried out. Nonetheless, we know from studies of musical socialization that the process of taste building is complete with adolescence, sometimes prolonged to the end of college attendance (Behne 1993). Therefore, I believe that our data on preferences can serve as measurements of cultural capital at the *beginning* of occupational careers. Nevertheless, in order to dispel doubts we should test the theses with better instruments.

(There is also the problem of different lengths of career paths of the persons in our sample depending on age, which is not regarded as supportive of our thesis and therefore negligible.)

2. RESULTS

2.1 Expansion of secondary education and the acquisition of cultural capital

The following table shows the means of ratings on all five musical genres for mobile and non-mobile persons in four different groups based on age and education. Mobility is defined as the difference between the education of the person and the person's father.

Age & education	Mobility	"Volksmusik" ¹	"Deutsche Schlagermusik" ²	Pop & rock music	Classical music	Jazz
		means				
Up to 50 years/ without Abitur ³	downward ⁴	3,94	3,34	2,40	2,97	3,23
	N=35					
	non mobile	3,43	2,72	2,26	3,38	3,76
	N=666					
	total	3,45	2,75	2,26	3,36	3,74
	N=701					
Up to 50 years/ with Abitur	non mobile	4,05	3,46	2,06	2,16	2,86
	N=113					
	upward	4,11	3,40	2,06	2,38	3,12
	N=185					
	total	4,09	3,42	2,06	2,30	3,02
	N=298					
50 years and more / without Abitur	downward ⁴	2,46	2,88	3,96	2,33	3,58
	N=24					
	non mobile	1,93	2,20	4,06	3,08	4,17
	N=795					
	total	1,95	2,22	4,05	3,06	4,15
	N=819					
50 and years more / with Abitur	non mobile	2,95	3,14	3,63	1,52	2,71
	N=58					
	upward	2,84	3,08	3,52	1,86	3,16
	N=83					
	total	2,89	3,11	3,56	1,72	2,97
	N=141					

Table 1: Musical preferences in West Germany; 1 "like it very much" to 5 "don't like it very much". Source: ALLBUS 1998

¹ The German term "Volksmusik" is closer to "Country music" than to "folk music" or so called "traditionals".

² Light Music with German lyrics.

³ "Abitur" means 12 or more years of education.

⁴ Downwardly mobile persons are not discussed in this paper.

Let's look at the preferences for classical music first. The younger, as well as the older upwardly mobile of the educated group prefer classical music to almost the same extent as the non-mobile group members. Upwardly mobile persons appear little less familiar with classical music as compared to persons from educated families. But the differences within a group are much smaller than between the groups. A test of significance has confirmed our assumption: While differences between educational groups are significant, differences between the young upwardly mobile and the non-mobile of the "educated class" are not.

However, in contrast to the older members of this "class" who prefer classical music clearly more than any other genre, the taste of the younger cohorts embraces classical music as well as pop and rock music, and what is mostly interesting, they share their love for rock and pop music with the uneducated group! While the differences between the groups among the older cohorts are reflected in the values for classical music as well as *Deutsche Schlagermusik* and *Volksmusik*, for which the educated people show much less interest, this polarity vanishes in the younger groups. In the group of older people there is no corresponding proximity of taste in any genre like preferences for pop and rock music of the younger people. Nevertheless the groups still differ. But the formerly exclusive cultural capital has been replaced by a capital that is more open to popular culture.

Although a closer look reveals a "patterned tolerance" (Bryson 1996) towards popular culture, which accepts pop and rock music, but excludes *Volksmusik* and *Deutsche Schlagermusik*, both being estimated poorly by those less than 50 years old, but undoubtedly the favorites of those older. (Taking into account the variances – standard deviations are about 1 – we should not overlook the fact that all boundaries between groups are blurred and that there are many exceptions to the rules.)

What about Jazz? I suppose the values are not easily interpreted. It seems to be a cultural capital that unites the non-mobile, older, educated persons with the younger. But it plays only a subordinate role in the lifestyle of the "upper class."

2.2 Different forms of cultural capital in the creation of social inequalities

In order to examine the role of different forms of cultural capital in the process of status attainment, I built two different indicators by adding and subtracting the results for all genres (jazz was excluded due to its low overall discrimination): one for the old cultural capital which focuses on classical music and despises all forms of popular music and one for the new form which comprises classical music and pop and rock music but shuns *Volksmusik* and *Deutsche Schlagermusik*. Borrowing terms from Richard A. Peterson (Peterson 1992) I call them "high brow snobbery" and "new omnivorousness."

Let's look at the values in table 2. It displays the standardized regression coefficients of two different OLS regression models explaining status attainment. The dependent variable in both cases is the so-called Magnitude Prestige. This is a status index based on the International Standard Classification of Occupations and on values for prestige, which have been derived from subjective classifications in surveys. These indices were developed for the

German occupational structure following similar international measurements of occupational prestige.

The first row shows the main variables of the traditional model of status attainment: education and the status of the family represented by the education of the father. The variables sex and age are held constant. Of course, education effects occupational prestige most greatly, the independent effect of the family background is minor. This means that there is only a slight opportunity to “inherit” status beyond the educational system. (This says nothing about the effect of family background on educational attainment or college attendance, which represent family background and status.)

In the second model, the two cultural capital variables are enclosed. R² slightly increases and the coefficient for education decreases. What is truly surprising is the considerable independent effect of “new omnivorousness” on status, which shows that preferences for classical music and pop and rock music serves as cultural capital. This effect is highly significant whereas “high brow snobbery” has no significant effect. (The minus sign of beta is due to the value labels. See Table 1.)

	Model 1	Model 2
	beta	beta
Education of father	0,056**	0,040
Education	0,611***	0,558***
Sex	-0,032	-0,042*
Age	0,037*	0,103***
“High brow snobbery”		-0,023
“New omnivorousness”		-0,137***
R ²	0,409	0,420

Table 2: Occupational status and cultural capital
 *p < 0,05 **p < 0,01 ***p < 0,001

3. CONCLUSIONS

The results partly contradict two of Bourdieu’s main assumption; firstly, that those who acquire cultural capital in school differ in their lifestyle from those who inherit it in the family and, secondly, that symbolic exclusion is the basis of social exclusion.

The upwardly mobile come very close to the pattern of preferences of the non-mobile members of the same “educational class”. (The more subtle differences of appropriate behavior, which are mentioned by Bourdieu, can hardly be studied in the frame of a quantitative survey.)

Furthermore, the difference between the classes of the younger cohorts is not as clearly reflected in a distinction between high and popular culture as it is in the older group. Although the tolerance of the educated is not boundless (they shun *Volksmusik* and *Deutsche Schlagermusik*) they share the preferences for pop and rock music with their less highly educated peers. Stressing the binary logic of symbolic forms in the tradition of French structuralism, Bourdieu overlooks the fact that more and more, the crossing and denying of symbolic boundaries serves as means of social exclusion (Lamont and Molnár 2002).

4. REFERENCES

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