Social and Cultural Capital

Social and cultural relationships have productive benefits in society. Research defines social capital as a form of economic (e.g., money and property) and cultural (e.g., norms, fellowship, trust) assets central to a social network (Putnam 2000). The social networks people create and maintain with each other enable society to function. However, the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1972) found social capital produces and reproduces inequality when examining how people gain powerful positions through direct and indirect social connections. Social capital or a social network can help or hinder someone personally and socially. For example, strong and supportive social connections can facilitate job opportunities and promotion that are beneficial to the individual and social network. Weak and unsupportive social ties can jeopardize employment or advancement that are harmful to the individual and social group as well. People make cultural objects meaningful (Griswold 2013). Interactions and reasoning develop cultural perspectives and understanding. The "social mind" of groups process incoming signals influencing culture within the social structure including the social attributes and status of members in a society (Zerubavel 1999). Language and symbols express a person’s position in society and the expectations associated with their status. For example, the clothes people wear or car they drive represents style, fashion, and wealth. Owning designer clothing or a high performance sports car depicts a person’s access to financial resources and worth. The use of formal language and titles also represent social status such as salutations including your majesty, your highness, president, director, chief executive officer, and doctor.

People may occupy multiple statuses in a society. At birth, people are ascribed social status in alignment to their physical and mental features, gender, and race. In some cases, societies differentiate status according to physical or mental disability as well as if a child is female or male, or a racial minority. According to Dr. Jody Heymann, Dean of the World Policy Analysis Center at the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health, "Persons with disabilities are one of the last groups whose equal rights have been recognized" around the world (Brink 2016). A report by the World Policy Analysis Center (2016) shows only 28% of 193 countries participating in the global survey guarantee a right to quality education for people with disabilities and only 18% guarantee a right to work.

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Updated: Wed, 28 Aug 2019 15:16:10 GMT
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In some societies, people may earn or achieve status from their talents, efforts, or accomplishments (Griffiths et al. 2015). Obtaining higher education or being an artistic prodigy often correspond to high status. For example, a college degree awarded from an “Ivy League” university social weighs higher status than a degree from a public state college. Just as talented artists, musicians, and athletes receive honors, privileges, and celebrity status.

Additionally, the social, political hierarchy of a society or region designates social status. Consider the social labels within class, race, ethnicity, gender, education, profession, age, and family. Labels defining a person’s characteristics serve as their position within the larger group. People in a majority or dominant group have higher status (e.g., rich, white, male, physician, etc.) than those of the minority or subordinate group (e.g., poor, black, female, housekeeper, etc.). Overall, the location of a person on the social strata influences their social power and participation (Griswold 2013). Individuals with inferior power have limitations to social and physical resources including lack of authority, influence over others, formidable networks, capital, and money.

Social status serves as method for building and maintaining boundaries among and between people and groups. Status dictates social inclusion or exclusion resulting in cultural stratification or hierarchy whereby a person’s position in society regulates their cultural participation by others. Cultural attributes within social networks build community, group loyalty, and personal and social identity.

People sometimes engage in status shifting to garner acceptance or avoid attention. DuBois (1903) described the act of people looking through the eyes of others to measure social place or position as double consciousness. His research explored the history and cultural experiences of American slavery and the plight of black folk in translating thinking and behavior between racial contexts. DuBois’ research helped sociologists understand how and why people display one identity in certain settings and another in different ones. People must negotiate a social situation to decide how to project their social identity and assign a label that fits (Kottak and Kozaitis 2012). Status shifting is evident when people move from informal to formal contexts. Our cultural identity and practices are very different at home than at school, work, or church. Each setting demands different aspects of who we are and our place in the social setting.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURAL CAPITAL

This short video (https://youtu.be/5DBEyiBkgp8) summarizes Pierre Bourdieu’s (1930-2002) theory of cultural capital or “the cultural knowledge that serves as currency that helps us navigate culture and alters our experiences and the opportunities available to us.” The video discusses three different forms of cultural capital: embodied state, objectified state, and institutionalized state with examples of each type that students can apply to their own lives. At the end of the video, discussion questions are included to assist students in applying the concept of cultural capital to what is happening in the world today. Prepare a written response addressing the four discussion questions presented in the video to share with the class.
Sociologists find **cultural capital** or the social assets of person (including intellect, education, speech pattern, mannerisms, and dress) promote social mobility (Harper-Scott and Samson 2009). People who accumulate and display the cultural knowledge of a society or group may earn social acceptance, status, and power. Bourdieau (1991) explained the accumulation and transmission of culture is a social investment from **socializing agents** including family, peers, and community. People learn culture and cultural characteristics and traits from one another; however, social status effects whether people share, spread, or communicate cultural knowledge to each other. A person’s social status in a group or society influences their ability to access and develop cultural capital.

Cultural capital provides people access to cultural connections such as institutions, individuals, materials, and economic resources (Kennedy 2012). Status guides people in choosing who and when culture or cultural capital is transferable. Bourdieu (1991) believed cultural inheritance and personal biography attributes to individual success more than intelligence or talent. With status comes access to social and cultural capital that generates access to privileges and power among and between groups. Individuals with cultural capital deficits face social inequalities (Reay 2004). If someone does not have the cultural knowledge and skills to maneuver the social world she or he occupies, then she or he will not find acceptance within a group or society and access to support and resources.

**COLLEGE SUCCESS AND CULTURAL CAPITAL**

Cultural capital evaluates the validity of culture (i.e., language, values, norms, and access to material resources) on success and achievement. You can measure your cultural capital by examining the cultural traits and patterns of your life. The following questions examine student values and beliefs, parental and family support, residency status, language, childhood experiences focusing on access to cultural resources (e.g., books) and neighborhood vitality (e.g., employment opportunities), educational and professional influences, and barriers affecting college success (Kennedy 2012).

1. What are the most important values or beliefs influencing your life?
2. What kind of support have you received from your parents or family regarding school and your education?
3. How many generations has your family lived in the United States?
4. What do you consider your primary language? Did you have any difficulty learning to read or write the English language?

5. Did your family have more than fifty books in the house when you were growing up? What type of reading materials were in your house when you were growing up?

6. Did your family ever go to art galleries, museums, or plays when you were a child? What types of activities did your family do with their time other than work and school?

7. How would you describe the neighborhood where you grew up?

8. What illegal activities, if any, were present in the neighborhood where you grew up?

9. What employment opportunities were available to your parents or family in the neighborhood where you grew up?

10. Do you have immediate family members who are doctors, lawyers, or other professionals? What types of jobs have your family members had throughout their lives?

11. Why did you decide to go to college? What has influenced you to continue or complete your college education?

12. Did anyone ever discourage or prevent you from pursuing academics or a professional career?

13. Do you consider school easy or difficult for you?

14. What has been the biggest obstacle for you in obtaining a college education?

15. What has been the greatest opportunity for you in obtaining a college education?

16. How did you learn to navigate educational environments? Who taught you the “ins” and “outs” of college or school?