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# Paradoxes of openness and distinction in the sharing economy



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## ABSTRACT

This paper studies four sites from the sharing economy to analyze how class and other forms of inequality operate within this type of economic arrangement. On the basis of interviews and participant observation at a time bank, a food swap, a makerspace and an open-access education site we find considerable evidence of distinguishing practices and the deployment of cultural capital, as understood by Bourdieusian theory. We augment Bourdieu with concepts from relational economic sociology, particularly Zelizer's "circuits of commerce" and "good matches," to show how inequality is reproduced within micro-level interactions. We find that the prevalence of distinguishing practices can undermine the relations of exchange and create difficulty completing trades. This results in an inconsistency, which we call the "paradox of openness and distinction," between actual practice and the sharing economy's widely articulated goals of openness and equity.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, Pierre Bourdieu's influence in sociology has increased markedly, including on the study of consumption and economic life (Sallaz & Zavisca, 2007). Bourdieu's formulation of multiple types of capital (economic, cultural and social) and their role in producing and reproducing durable inequality has been highly productive in a variety of contexts. However, while scholars have examined practices of distinction, the structure of particular fields, and the role of specific capitals in social reproduction, there has been less attention to economic exchanges at a micro, interactional level (King, 2000). In this paper, we use a Bourdieusian approach to study new kinds of exchanges in the "sharing economy" and the ways in which distinction and inequality operate within them. To do this, we extend Bourdieu by bringing in conceptual tools from relational economic sociology. This literature, pioneered by Viviana Zelizer (2005b, 2010, 2012), emphasizes the importance of meaning, the role of culture in structuring economic activity, and the idea that economic exchanges require ongoing interpersonal negotiations. We use relational analysis to study how people deploy, convert, and use their capital. In particular, we show how cultural capital is used to establish superior position in the context of various types of exchanges. Thus, our contribution is an investigation into how Bourdieusian inequality is reproduced via interpersonal relations in the context of exchange.

Our approach involves the introduction of two concepts from relational economic sociology – circuits of commerce and good matches. Zelizer defines the former as "a structure combining its own economic activities, media, accounting systems,

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interpersonal relations, boundaries, and meanings,” that appear “in a wide variety of social circumstances and cannot simply be reduced to firms, markets, or networks.” While circuits can exist in all contexts, the concept has mostly been used outside of formal economies, such as the new organizations studied in this paper. To date, the circuits literature has had little to say about class inequality, however, it seems likely that classed systems of power shape circuit formation, functioning, and viability. A second contribution of this paper is to explicitly consider how structural inequality, as represented by distributions of multiple forms of capital, affects the operation of circuits. More specifically, we ask: what is the relationship between cultural power—as exercised through distinguishing practices—and the robust development and functioning of circuits?

To answer that question, we focus on a rapidly growing class of circuits that goes by the name of the sharing economy.<sup>1</sup> Sharing initiatives include peer-to-peer lodging and transportation services, time banks, goods exchanges and other forms of collaboration (Schor & Fitzmaurice, 2015). We examine four cases from the sharing economy: a time bank, a food swap, a makerspace and an open-access educational initiative. We believe the sharing economy is ideal for exploring the operation of inequality in circuits, in part because many of these exchange sites explicitly seek to break down traditional relationships of power. In addition, because they are relatively new, our research sites lack taken-for-granted understandings of the exchanges they facilitate. Participants offer competing ideas and visions of what is valuable and worthy of exchange, and who is worthy of being included in exchanges. These interactions allow us to see how distinction, a key mechanism for the reproduction of inequality, is relationally produced and reproduced. To do so we use Zelizer’s concept of relational matching (Zelizer, 2010, 2012) to analyze participants’ ability to make exchanges in the face of these competing understandings. Successful sharing economy initiatives depend on creating the conditions for large numbers of matches to occur, thereby achieving robust transactional networks.

Our findings suggest a phenomenon that we call the paradox of openness and distinction. Virtually all exchange sites and digital platforms within the sharing economy explicitly advocate for open access and equality of opportunity, if not fairness and even economic egalitarianism. We find this discourse among our respondents as well as the sites’ own mission statements and self-descriptions. However, at the same time, we find considerable evidence of distinguishing practices. These displays of class power in turn undermine the successful formation and reproduction of circuits. For certain types of circuits—particularly those with less market-driven principles of exchange—high levels of inequality and displays of distinction make it hard to establish robust circuits by inhibiting the formation of matches. In the circuits that are characterized by more distinguishing practices we observe a lower volume of trading. In fact, the two most “relational” sites (the time bank and the food swap) fail to produce the types of matches that generate robust trading economies. To understand why this might be the case, we turn now to a discussion of the relational and structural (Bourdieuian) perspectives.

## 2. Complicating the good match: matching with distinction

For Bourdieu, relationships of inequality are produced and reproduced within specific fields. The concept of the field provides an analytic framework for understanding relationships between producers and consumers, competitions for various types of capital, and the possibilities available to actors in a bounded context (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Johnson, 1993). Fields are governed by sets of rules, values, and forms of capital (dominant vs. subordinate), and are populated by actors with varied amounts and compositions of capital who are attempting to improve their positions within these fields. For Bourdieu, the class hierarchy, in which certain practices and ways of living are valued above others, results in fields becoming arenas for attaining distinction.

Bourdieu’s conceptualization of the field has faced resistance from scholars for being overly structural, and as a result, static (Gartman, 1991). In some ways, a Bourdieuian field resembles a war of position, with a well-defined structure, but a lack of movement. While Bourdieu believes fields can be de-stabilized, the literature contains few studies of transformations in the underlying binaries of taste (for an exception, see Carfagna et al., 2014). By contrast, we have chosen sites in which people are trying to either transform existing fields or create new ones that are not characterized by logics of domination. They are hoping to build more egalitarian, non-exploitative, and personal relationships. Participants in these sites frequently understand their actions as attempts to construct new forms of economy and exchange, which embody values that are different from the dominant values in mainstream fields, such as food, education, manufacturing or service provision. At the same time, we should not underestimate the power of logics of domination that participants encounter in daily life. Transcending them requires more than just good intentions and novel economic arrangements—it also requires new interpersonal relations that are grounded in alternative sets of cultural relations.

These types of novel economic connections are addressed in the work of Viviana Zelizer, who has introduced the idea of circuits of commerce. Circuits are economic organizations that are not markets, networks or hierarchies (Zelizer, 2007, 2010). Zelizer identifies five criteria a pattern of interactions must possess to constitute a circuit of commerce, rather than a market or a social network: social relationships among a group of individuals, economic exchanges stemming from those

<sup>1</sup> We follow the practice of occasionally using quotes around this term to indicate that by its use we do not necessarily subscribe to the view that all activity in this sector is rightly called sharing. There is considerable controversy about the nature of the exchanges on for-profit platforms such as Airbnb and Uber.

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