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# Cultural capital formation in adolescence: High schools and the gender gap in arts activity participation



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## ABSTRACT

Gender differences in arts consumption have early roots among adolescents. Girls have historically dominated participation in extracurricular arts activities. Yet research does not consider whether gender gaps in participation are consistent across schools and whether school-based resources might influence them. In this paper, we combine data on ninth-grade students (typically, 14–15 year-olds) at public high schools in the state of North Carolina with data from schools to examine how school-based resources influence gender gaps in arts participation. We find that the extent and direction of the gender gaps for arts participation vary significantly across schools. In particular, school location—whether rural or urban—and racial composition influence the extent of these gender gaps. Our results suggest that adolescent culture as it pertains to gender and arts participation varies across schools and that this variation likely reinforces or attenuates gender differences in cultural participation among adults that are often linked to early arts socialization.

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## 1. Introduction

The fact that women have higher levels of cultural participation than men do has long puzzled scholars. In fact, women have been found to participate in virtually every type of high-status cultural activity at higher rates than men, including going to art museums, attending plays and high-status musical concerts, and reading literary fiction (Cheerbo & Peters, 1995; DiMaggio, 1982; Dumais, 2002; Lizardo, 2006a; Tepper, 2000). Part of the puzzle is that women's apparent advantages in cultural capital, as indicated by involvement in and knowledge of "legitimate" culture (Bourdieu, 1984), appear to be at odds with their disadvantages in socioeconomic status relative to men (Bihagen & Katz-Gerro, 2000; Christin, 2012).

Although treatments of the question of why women's cultural participation outstrips that of men's are relatively rare (DiMaggio, 2004), most explanations focus on the family context and childhood socialization. Indeed, Christin (2012) finds that the gender gap in arts participation among adults is partly explained by the fact that girls take art lessons and classes more often compared to boys during childhood. Others focus on the role that mothers play in producing the "status culture" of the family and transmitting taste preferences to the next generation (Bourdieu, 2001; Collins, 1992; Willekens & Lievens, 2014). Yet recent studies also point to institutional contexts beyond the family, such as libraries and schools (Kraaykamp, 2003) or workplace settings (Christin, 2012; Lizardo, 2006a), which can reinforce or attenuate gender differences in arts participation that are rooted in family background and socialization. In our view, the school context during adolescence represents an understudied but potentially fruitful avenue for better understanding the determinants of the gender gap in arts participation.

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In fact, there is ample theoretical reason to expect influences during adolescence to be particularly important in the formation of later habits of arts consumption. Adolescents are in the midst of a critical developmental period of identity formation, a period that allows them to try on various social roles in a relatively low-stakes way (Erikson, 1963). Part of this process of identity formation includes understanding how the individual connects to the broader society. School context plays an integral role in this process of identity development, shaping the available social roles, and the relative attractiveness of the social roles available to adolescents (Crosnoe & Johnson, 2011; Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Peer networks and peer culture, which are structured by school context, play a pronounced role in adolescence (Crosnoe, 2000; Lahire, 2011) and have been found to influence extracurricular participation experiences (Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003; Patrick et al., 1999) as well as cultural tastes (Selfhout, Branje, ter Bogt, & Meeus, 2009). Therefore, it is critical to examine how school context shapes the extracurriculum, which is a key avenue through which adolescents develop their identities; form relationships around shared cultural tastes; and experiment with social roles, most especially (for our purposes) gendered social roles (Eder & Parker, 1987; Morris, 2008).

Participation in school-based extracurricular activities is an integral part of high school for many students in the United States and is one way of building adolescents' understanding of where and how they fit in the world.<sup>1</sup> Historically, girls have had higher participation rates than boys in extracurricular arts activities (Ingels et al., 2005). While sports are perhaps the highest prestige extracurricular activity in American high schools, other types of activities are also important to study, given their potential links to later arts consumption, the prevalence of participation,<sup>2</sup> and the fact that boys and girls participate in them together, in contrast to sex-segregated sports (Billig, 2004; Christin, 2012; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Kraaykamp, 2003; Lenzi et al., 2012; Mahatmya & Lohman, 2012). Yet, while research has established that girls participate more in arts activities than boys and that this participation presages adult inequalities in arts consumption (Nagel, Ganzeboom, Haanstra, & Oud, 1997; Nagel & Ganzeboom, 2002), it is unclear whether and how school contexts differentially influence the process of cultural capital accumulation during adolescence and whether differences in school context regarding extracurricular activities might influence gendered inequalities in participation.

Some research suggests that school settings differ with respect to extracurricular participation, in that students experience benefits of such participation in some schools to a greater extent than they do in others (Guest & McRee, 2009; Hoffman, 2006; Hoffman & Xu, 2002). Furthermore, qualitative studies offer evidence that school contexts regarding extracurricular participation differ by showing variations across schools in the extent and ordering of peer status structures: these variations include differences in the types of activities that students consider to be "high-status" (Milner, 2004; Brown, Mory, & Kinney, 1994). Thus, it is plausible that gendered patterns of participation in these activities might also differ across schools, such that girls and boys may have unequal opportunities across schools to accumulate cultural capital. Such variations in school context are particularly important given that higher levels of cultural capital are associated with better non-cognitive skills and achievement in school, as well as higher standardized test scores, among other outcomes (Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997; Covay & Carbonaro, 2010; De Graaf, De Graaf, & Kraaykamp, 2000; Deasy, 2002; DiMaggio, 1982; Dumais, 2002, 2006; Farkas, Grobe, Sheehan, & Shuan, 1990; Feldman & Matjasko, 2005).<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, we examine whether aspects of school context—including school size, gender composition, ethnic composition, school SES, and location—condition the connection between gender and participation in arts activities. Taking girls' higher participation in arts clubs as given, we ask first to what extent gender gaps in participation vary across schools and second, how school context might account for those gaps. Our first research question concerns *whether* the school context influences the association between student gender and arts participation. Our second research question addresses the ways in which school context might influence the extent and direction of gender gaps in arts participation. Students attend different types of schools, and various school-level factors, including demographic composition and school location, may affect the relative extent of gender gaps in participation, as they have been shown to affect other aspects of adolescent culture (Milner, 2004). Here, we draw on existing research regarding regional, socioeconomic, and racial differences in norms regarding traditional gender roles (e.g., Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009) to argue that gender interacts with the school context to influence the size of the gender gaps in arts activity participation. A unique statewide dataset with school and student measures from all publically-funded high schools in North Carolina, a racially/ethnically diverse and populous state in the southeastern United States, allows us to answer our research questions.

<sup>1</sup> Participating in these types of activities may also bring benefits, including increased noncognitive skills, higher levels of school engagement and identification with the school mission, and lower levels of delinquency for students who participate (Covay & Carbonaro, 2010; Feldman & Matjasko, 2005). In addition, schools with higher extracurricular participation rates have been found to have higher achievement levels and lower dropout rates (Stearns & Glennie, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Overall, approximately 21.5% of high school sophomores participate in musical clubs (Ingels et al., 2005).

<sup>3</sup> These results do not reach consensus, as others have found no impact of cultural capital on educational outcomes (Katsilis & Rubinson, 1990; Rubinson & Garnier, 1985).

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