



Girls as elite distinction: The appropriation of bodily capital



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ABSTRACT

The capital concept has proliferated in studies of culture and stratification, usually depicting individual assets as personal advantages within given fields. Because this approach sidesteps issues of ownership, it obscures how unequal value can be generated through the appropriation of someone else's capital. Based on fieldwork in the global VIP party circuit from New York to Cannes, as well as 84 interviews with party organizers and patrons, I document the uses of women's bodily capital by men who appropriate women as a symbolic resource to generate profit, status, and social ties in an exclusive world of businessmen. I argue that women are unable to capitalize on their bodily capital as effectively through participation in the VIP scene because codes of sexual morality penalize women for strategic intimacy. By shifting the analysis of capital from individual advantages to systemic extra-individual advantages, this article brings appropriation into the study of culture and class. Further, this article genders the elite by documenting the cultural incompatibilities of femininity in elite men's social spaces.

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1. Introduction

Since the expansion of human capital to account for the cultural foundations of class inequality (Bourdieu, 1986), new concepts of cultural capital have proliferated. Some are in response to changes in the world, like changing class structure and hence, emergent cultural capitals (Priour & Savage, 2013), while others are efforts to understand specific fields, like sexual capital (Martin & George, 2006), and the role of the body in carrying capitals, from esthetic (Anderson, Grunert, Katz, & Lovascio, 2010), bodily (Wacquant, 1995), and physical capital (Shilling, 1993). Marx's concern with capital accumulation centered on owners and the unequal extraction of value, yet in sociology's current "accumulation of capitals" (Neveu, 2013), there is a relative absence of attention to appropriation and ownership (Chauvin & Jaunait 2015). To whom does the value of all of these capitals go?

This article revisits the problem of ownership in the case of women's "embodied cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1984). Building on feminist revisions of capital conversions (McCall, 1992; Skeggs, 2004), I examine the uses of women's bodily capital and the differential value it generates for men and for women. If, as Randall Collins has posited (1992), women are to status as men are to class, what types of status signals do women give off, and why does their value accrue disproportionately to men?

I present ethnographic data on the circulation of women with highly valued bodily capital, called "girls," in the international circuit of VIP parties catering to the new global elite. A modern social and representational category, "the girl" is a contested status of young women who lie outside childhood and outside social conventions of adulthood relating to gender, marriage, sexuality, and motherhood (Weinbaum et al., 2008). I show how men and women unequally profit from

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women's embodied symbolic capital, or *girl capital* for short, which men use to generate status and social connections in an exclusive world of businessmen. I document this process by following women throughout the VIP party scene and studying party organizers, called “promoters,” who are largely male brokers hired to bring women to VIP destinations. I observe women at parties in New York, the Hamptons, Miami, and the French Riviera over 18 months.

Additionally, this article draws from interviews with 20 “girls,” 44 promoters, and 20 clients (men who spend money in VIP parties). Drawing from men's interviews, I map the moral distinctions—especially around sexual morality—that men use to evaluate “girls.” I argue that women are unable to capitalize on their bodily capital through participation in the VIP scene precisely because using their bodily capital aligns them with devalued social identities.

By shifting the analysis from capital as an individual resource to the structural conditions and cultural meanings that make capital unequally convertible, this article foregrounds systems of ownership and appropriation in the study of culture and class. In addition, this paper “genders” the elite and documents the cultural contradictions of femininity and power in elite men's social spaces.

2. The capital concept

2.1. Embodied capital as personal advantage

Bourdieu's work on cultural capital inspired a proliferation of descendent concepts to show how people navigate through various fields, from the neoliberal city (Centner, 2008 on spatial capital) to underground parties (Thornton, 1995 on subcultural capital). By establishing the conversion value of people's various capitals, sociologists have explicated the cultural mechanisms of class reproduction (e.g. DiMaggio, 1982).

However, these refinements tend to understand the value of cultural capital as a personal resource, because such analyses are concerned with how people or groups of people advance through fields to acquire, for example, free-ranging access to neighborhoods (Centner, 2008) or social esteem (Thornton, 1995). This tendency to focus on individual-level rewards characterizes the conceptual offspring of Bourdieu's “embodied cultural capital,” those corporeal cues of class written onto the body (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 91). Bourdieu noted that looks are not entirely dependent on class trajectories,¹ and to account for the resource of physical appearance, sociologists have developed an array of concepts: bodily capital (Wacquant, 1995), physical capital (Shilling, 1993), and esthetic capital (Anderson et al., 2010).

Together, these works show how embodied capitals are convertible for individual rewards, like earnings, status, and romantic outcomes (e.g., Hammerness, 2011). For example, Green shows how “sexual capital,” the recognition of being desirable in a given field, orders status in nightlife (2011). The conversion rates of bodily capital are gendered (Martin & George, 2006), and some feminist scholars argue that femininity itself is a form of capital not accessible to men, for instance, in the care work field (Huppatz, 2009).

These analyses implicitly frame the primary value of someone's embodied capital as residing with the capital holder herself. An extreme version of this argument is the concept of “erotic capital,” which Hakim argues is women's collective asset because a biological mandate makes women's sex appeal more valuable than men's (2010; for a critique see Green, 2013). By keeping the focus on capital as a personal asset with individual outcomes, sociologists implicitly share with neoclassical economists an assumption that self-investment leads to better market outcomes, paradigmatic of human capital theory (Becker, 1994).² This is explicit in Hakim's framing of erotic capital, which posits beauty as a currency; she who possesses it gets to “spend” it. Such an approach exemplifies a neoliberal philosophy of the personal imperative for self-investment and a disregard for systemic power relations that unequally distribute the value of erotic capital across populations. This approach also conflates the holder of a given property as its owner, thus ignoring the political economy that structures the value of capital (Chauvin & Jaunait 2015). Moving beyond the personal advantage perspective, we might ask: who, beyond the endowed individual, benefits from the value of people's embodied capital, and how?

2.2. Gender and the unequal value of embodied capital

Scholars working at the intersection of gender and Bourdieusian theory have begun to chart how gender structures the field of power such that women and men have differential capacities to profit from the value of their own capital (McCall, 1992; Skeggs, 2004). As “sign-bearing capital,” Skeggs notes, women are a resource that men can use (2004, pp. 22–23) to generate social capital and status (see also Chancer, 1998).

Much literature shows how women's bodies signify men's class distinction, as Veblen noted among 19th century *nouveau riche* (2009 [1899]). Ethnographies document such processes of distinction in interactional services like retail, where women workers are deliberately hired to construct high status (Hanser, 2008, p. 106; Sherman, 2007). Women's bodies add value to

¹ Bourdieu is contradictory on this point. Sometimes, class and one's trajectory through social space determine looks; other times, looks are random accidents of birth (see Martin & George, 2006 for a critique). He does note that beauty is valuable to those who possess it, particularly women, especially for occupational profit in the labor market (1984).

² Human capital theory frames capital as an individual investment that is exchangeable on the free market for scarce rewards; by framing wage-earners as miniature capitalists, this approach overlooks how systems of power enable some people to extract exchange-value from others (e.g. Karabel & Halsey, 1977, pp. 307–312).

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