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# Foundations of the cultural repertoire: Education and social network effects among expectant mothers



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## ABSTRACT

The challenges of operationalizing the cultural repertoire or “toolkit” have long hindered its empirical study. This has limited scholarly knowledge about the development and effects of cultural resources. This paper draws on original survey data to investigate the foundation of individual cultural repertoire diversity. Using a novel, empirically-grounded measure of the variety of interpretive frames known by expectant mothers, I ask (a) whether more privileged respondents “consume” a wider variety of cultural resources than do less privileged individuals, as has been the pattern for the consumption of cultural products like music; and (b) whether this consumption is related to respondents’ social network characteristics, as literature from select sociological subfields would suggest. I find that educational attainment and social network diversity independently predict repertoire diversity, and that these effects are each moderated by the respondent’s status as a new or experienced mother. These analyses reveal a new way in which human and social capital confer cultural resources, while also suggesting that institutional effects and social network resources may reduce such disparities. The survey instrument presented here overcomes a long-standing methodological barrier to studying individual cultural repertoires and can be modified to use in other empirical contexts.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the most exciting developments in cultural sociology—defining culture as a set of resources for action (Lamont, 1992; Lamont and Thévenot, 2000; Swidler, 1986, 2001)—has been challenging to operationalize empirically. We remain uncertain about how individuals stock their “toolkit” and how they employ multiple cultural tools to their advantage. This paper advances a novel measure of individuals’ variety of cultural resources, and uses that measure to investigate what individual characteristics foster diverse toolkits.

What differentiates people who “consume” a greater variety of cultural products and resources from people who consume fewer? This question has animated a great deal of research on the consumption and diffusion of cultural products like art, theater, and music, some of which has found that those who consume a greater range of cultural products are in a variety of ways more privileged than those who consume a smaller range (e.g., Peterson, 1992; Peterson and Kern, 1996).<sup>1</sup> The factors that shape the consumption of aspects of culture that are substantively different from these “products,”

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<sup>1</sup> Some research has complicated these findings (e.g., Peterson, 2005; Van Eijck, 2001; van Eijck and Lievens, 2008), but in most cases there is evidence that socioeconomic status is salient to the consumption of these cultural products.

however—aspects such as the resources theorized by Swidler (1986, 2001) in her influential cultural repertoire theory—are far less well understood.

Repertoire theory asserts that culture causally shapes individual actions and outcomes by providing the resources or ‘tools,’ with which people act in specific social contexts (e.g., skills, styles, ways of understanding the world). A key implication of the theory is that individuals with richer, more diverse repertoires are better able to situate their actions and perspectives and to face diverse and unpredictable challenges than are people with less rich repertoires: “People are better equipped for life if they have available multiple approaches to situations, if they can shift justifications for their actions, and if they can mobilize different meanings to organize different lines of action” (Swidler 2001:182–3).

A wide range of sociological studies have employed repertoire theory (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999; Derner, 1994, 1995; Erickson, 1996; Giordano et al., 2002; Harding, 2007, 2010; Lamont, 1992; Lamont and Small, 2008; Lamont and Thévenot, 2000; Lareau, 2003; Small, 2002, 2004; Swidler, 2001). Works such as these reveal little, however, about the characteristic at the heart of the theory: having diverse resources in one’s toolkit (see as exceptions Fosse, 2010; Harding, 2007, 2010). Moreover, they do not systematically investigate the origins of more or less diverse cultural resources on the level at which the repertoire was originally theorized: the individual. These lacunae result from the conceptual and methodological barriers to operationalizing the cultural repertoire.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper I address this problem in two steps. First, I create a context-specific measure of the cultural repertoire by focusing on one important and particularly measurable aspect of it: interpretive frames. Following Goffman (1974), these are the schemas of understanding that make various aspects of social life meaningful and comprehensible—the lenses with which individuals perceive, define and act on their social environments. I measured pregnant women’s exposure to diverse interpretive frames relevant to pregnancy, childbirth and infant care via an original, fieldwork-based survey instrument, and used it to calculate a measure of respondent access to a meaningfully diverse set of interpretive cultural resources. Second, I investigated the sources of individuals’ repertoire diversity, focusing primarily on human and social capital, as suggested by a review of relevant literature. I present this “cultural repertoire diversity” (CRD) measure as a methodological innovation for a field currently experiencing heightened interest in measurement (Mohr and Ghaziani, 2014). I situate these inquiries in the context of expectant and new motherhood as it is an unusually rich social moment in which to study the characteristics, origins, and effects of individuals’ cultural resources.

I find that level of education and the occupational diversity of a respondent’s social network independently predict repertoire diversity. These predictors are partially moderated by the respondent’s maternal status (i.e., whether she is a first-time or experienced mother), which scholarly literature, associated study data and repertoire theory suggest is due to the more intensive engagement first-time mothers have with prenatal care institutions. Among other insights, the findings here suggest that the well-researched effects of education and social networks on advantageous outcomes (e.g., job attainment) may function partly by conferring cultural resources. Via a methodological innovation that generates novel data on cultural resources, this paper overcomes a long-standing barrier to understanding the development of individuals’ cultural repertoires.

## 2. The origins of a diverse repertoire

Swidler (1986, 2001) provides some clues as to the possible origins of diverse cultural resources. In *Talk of Love*, she observes that her interviewees gained new ways of understanding their marital relationships via exposure to people with practices different from their own, via participation in diverse institutions and activities (e.g., church, counseling, self-help workshops), and via “integration into a wider community” (Swidler, 2001, 52). This idea that one can learn varied ways of thinking or seeing by coming into contact with individuals of different communities and social locations is suggested by some classic sociological theories as well (Mead, 1934; Simmel, 1971a, 1971b; Zerubavel, 1997). Other works that draw on repertoire theory, however, such as Derner (1995), suggest that it is individual characteristics (e.g., human and economic capital) that enable individuals to access diverse interpretive frames. Research in cognitive and social psychology support both these possibilities, locating the source of different pieces of culture in the social environment (for a review see DiMaggio (1997), 267). Below I consider these influences by reviewing research in cultural sociology and related fields. I draw heavily on literature on the consumption of cultural products to fill the gaps left by limited research on the consumption of cultural resources. The former has benefited from decades of investigation into individual-level predictors of diversity in taste and consumption and, though the stakes of interpretive resources are arguably higher than those of cultural products, there are no reasons at this point to insist that their distributional patterns and underlying mechanisms would be dissimilar. Relevant explanations from all fields sort broadly into socioeconomic and social network factors.

The period of pregnancy and expectant motherhood is a particularly fruitful social moment in which to investigate the origins of individual-level cultural resources. For many women, this time is characterized by exposure to new and often contradictory practices, standards, information, and ways of thinking (Bessett, 2010; Miller, 2007; Nelson, 2009; Root and Browner, 2001). The new interpretive resources that accrue to individuals’ repertoires during this time—often “packaged” in the form of advice, cautionary tales and public health recommendations—are far more observable via social science methods than are those acquired earlier in life. Additionally, such cultural resources matter greatly in this period because many women across social strata in the U.S. experience pregnancy, birth and early motherhood as a period of both great

<sup>2</sup> For discussion of the strengths, limitations, and unanswered questions of repertoire theory, see Swidler, 2008 and Vaisey 2008a, 2008b.

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