



Cultural capital, teacher bias, and educational success: New evidence from monozygotic twins



Mads Meier Jæger ^{a,*}, Stine Møllegaard ^b

^a Department of Sociology, University of Copenhagen, Øster Farimagsgade 5, 1353 Copenhagen K, Denmark

^b Department of Sociology and Nuffield College, University of Oxford, Manor Road, Oxford OX1 3UQ, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we use new data on Danish monozygotic (MZ) twins to analyze the effect of cultural capital on educational success. We report three main findings. First, cultural capital has a positive direct effect on the likelihood of completing the college-bound track in Danish secondary education. Second, cultural capital leads teachers to form upwardly biased perceptions of children's academic ability, but only when their exposure to children's cultural capital is brief (as in oral and written exams) rather than long (as in grades awarded at the end of the school year). Third, we find that the positive direct effect of cultural capital on educational success is higher for children from high-socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds than for those from low-SES backgrounds. This result suggests that high-SES children are more likely to be in schooling contexts that enable them to convert cultural capital into educational success.

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1. Introduction

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction offers an influential explanation of why some children are more successful in the educational system than others. Bourdieu argued that cultural capital, that is familiarity with the dominant cultural codes in a society, is a key determinant of educational success because it is misperceived by teachers as academic brilliance and rewarded as such. Moreover, because children from high socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds on average possess more cultural capital than those from low-SES backgrounds, they have a comparative advantage in the educational system which helps them reproduce their privileged social position (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

Despite widespread *prima facie* support for the theory of cultural reproduction (e.g., Aschaffenburg and Maas, 1997; Cheadle, 2008; de Graaf et al., 2000; DiMaggio, 1982; DiMaggio and Mohr, 1985; Dumais, 2002; Jæger, 2009; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999; Sullivan, 2001; van de Werfhorst and Hofstede, 2007; Xu and Hampden-Thompson, 2012; Yamamoto and Brinton, 2010), empirical research that has sought to test this theory is limited in three important regards.

First, most research uses cross-sectional data and research designs that make it difficult to isolate the effect of individuals' cultural capital on educational success from the effect of other aspects of family background that are correlated with, but substantively different from, cultural capital (for example, economic and social capital). The consequence of this limitation is that existing research may overstate the effect of cultural capital because it conflates the effect of cultural capital with the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: mmj@soc.ku.dk (M.M. Jæger), stine.mollegaard@sociology.ox.ac.uk (S. Møllegaard).

effect of other unmeasured aspects of family background that also affect educational success (Gaddis, 2013; Jæger, 2011; Kingston, 2001).

Second, most research estimates the effect of cultural capital on educational success but does not address the key mechanism through which Bourdieu argued that cultural capital operates: teacher bias. In Bourdieu's account, teachers misconceive cultural capital as academic brilliance, which leads to upwardly biased evaluations of children's academic ability. And although some research has analyzed the impact of cultural capital on teachers' evaluations of children (Bodovski and Farkas, 2008; Dumais, 2006; Farkas et al., 1990; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999; Wildhagen, 2009), it has not systematically linked teacher bias to educational success.

Third, existing research has only to a limited degree analyzed heterogeneity in the effect of cultural capital on educational success (instead, it has focused on estimating the average effect of cultural capital). Some research suggests that the returns to cultural capital vary by family background because children from high- and low-SES backgrounds are in schooling contexts that vary with regard to how much they appreciate and reward cultural capital (Andersen and Jæger, 2015; Aschaffenburg and Maas, 1997; DiMaggio, 1982). However, only little research has explored this idea.

In this paper we use new data and a novel research design to address each of the three limitations outlined above. Our first contribution is that we use data on monozygotic (MZ) or identical twins from Denmark to estimate the effect of individual cultural capital on educational success. Since MZ twins are genetically identical at birth and are exposed to the same family environment during their upbringing, we are able to hold constant family background and isolate the causal direct effect of individual cultural capital on educational success (measured by Grade Point Average [GPA] at the end of compulsory school and the likelihood of completing upper secondary education, the college-bound track in Danish secondary education). Only three previous studies have addressed bias from unmeasured aspects of family background, for example by using sibling or panel data (Gaddis, 2013; Jæger, 2011; Jæger and Breen, 2016). We improve on this line of research by using an MZ twin design that controls fully for unmeasured genetic and environmental aspects of family background (e.g., Ashenfelter and Rouse, 1998; Guo and Stearns, 2002; Nielsen, 2006). Similarly with previous research that uses sibling data, our MZ twin design which controls for shared family background does not allow us to test Bourdieu's contention that cultural capital mediates the effect of family background on educational success. However, and as we explain in detail below, our design provides an important advantage over existing research by enabling us to plausibly estimate the causal *direct* effect of individual cultural capital on educational success (i.e., the effect which can be attributed to differences in cultural capital between individuals) and to identify heterogeneous returns to cultural capital (because our design controls for selection into different schooling contexts).

Our second contribution is that we test if the effect of individual cultural capital on educational success operates via teacher bias, as suggested by Bourdieu. We use information on two sets of GPAs for each twin in our data: (1) GPA based on grades awarded by teachers during the final year of compulsory school (at age 15/16) and (2) GPA awarded by anonymous reviewers and teachers in the final exams taken at the end of compulsory school. The key difference between the two GPAs (which are based on grades in the same subjects) is that the first is more likely to be influenced by cultural capital than the second. Teachers are exposed to a child's cultural capital throughout the school year which, according to Bourdieu, should affect their perceptions of the child's academic ability and their grading practices. By contrast, grades in the final exams are awarded jointly by anonymous reviewers (who never meet the child or, in the case of oral exams, only meet the child briefly) and by teachers (who do meet the child), which leaves much less room for cultural capital to operate. We assess the role of teacher bias by analyzing if the effect of cultural capital differs between the two sets of GPAs for the same child, with the hypothesis being that cultural capital should have a stronger effect on GPA awarded by teachers during the school year than on GPA awarded in the final exams.

Our third contribution is that we test if returns to cultural capital with regard to educational success vary by children's socioeconomic background. Existing research has proposed, but has been unable to convincingly distinguish, two competing hypotheses regarding heterogeneity in returns to cultural capital. The *cultural mobility hypothesis* argues that children from low-SES backgrounds have a higher return to cultural capital than those from high-SES backgrounds because they tend to be in schooling contexts with less cultural capital and, if possessed, cultural capital is easier to "show off" to one's advantage. By contrast, the *cultural reproduction hypothesis* argues that returns to cultural capital are higher for high-SES children because the schooling contexts that these children occupy are particularly susceptible to recognizing and rewarding cultural capital (de Graaf et al., 2000; DiMaggio, 1982; Jæger, 2011; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999). Our research design is well-suited for distinguishing these two hypotheses because it controls for unmeasured aspects of family background that select high- and low-SES children into different schooling contexts. Thus, we can interpret SES gradients in returns to cultural capital as originating from differences between schooling contexts rather than from differences between families.

We report three main findings. First, we find that individual cultural capital has a positive direct effect on the likelihood of completing upper secondary education. The effect is substantively large even though there is only little variation between MZ twins with regard to how much cultural capital they possess. Second, and contrary to expectations, we find that individual cultural capital has a positive effect on GPA in the final exams at the end of compulsory school but has no effect on GPA awarded during the school year. This result suggests that cultural capital leads teachers to form biased perceptions of children's academic ability, but only when their exposure to children's cultural capital is brief, as is the case in a written or oral exam. Third, we find that the positive direct effect of individual cultural capital on educational success exists only among the children of the highly educated; children whose parents have low education reap no returns to their cultural capital. This result is consistent with the cultural reproduction hypothesis.

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