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Cultural capital in the elite subfield of Swedish higher education

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ABSTRACT

The idea of a strong tie between culture and education, advocated by Bourdieu and his colleagues from the 1960s, is in this article explored in detail by investigating cultural capital in both its embodied state, expressed in tastes and cultural practices among students in the elite subfield of Swedish higher education, and its institutionalised state, through an analysis of the same students' enrolment patterns. By applying Specific MCA to a questionnaire answered by 1152 students at 20 socially and scholarly selective programmes we identify three main dimensions in the space of lifestyles. The first dimension separates advanced and legitimate cultural practices and tastes from mainstream ones. In a second dimension, elaborate and often costly body-oriented practices in training or clothing are distinguished from a more ascetic lifestyle. The third dimension opposes a pole of establishment from a pole of non-establishment. The study programmes are well dispersed in the space of lifestyles, which suggests a close relation between embodied and institutionalised states of cultural capital. We finally argue that the pursuit of field-specific capital best explains this dispersion: the future trajectories into specific regions of the field of power tend to correspond to distinct lifestyles of various categories of elite students.

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1. Introduction: culture and education

Already in the book that made Bourdieu famous, *Les héritiers* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964), a major theme was the close interrelations between culture and education. The insight that inequality in relation to School is an aspect of inequality in relation to Culture permeates this and other contemporaneous texts by Bourdieu and his collaborators. In other words, the sociology of education should be a major component of the sociology of culture. The educational system serves, at least in a society such as the French, as the prime site for the generation, reproduction, transfer, distribution and legitimisation of cultural capital. Furthermore, the selection of students to more or less successful educational trajectories was, according to the early studies from Bourdieu's centre, mainly determined by their inherited or acquired possession of cultural capital.

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However, this very basic insight is absent in many of the flourishing studies drawing inspiration from Bourdieu's sociology of education and culture. There is an apparent division of labour where sociologists of culture tend to focus on lifestyles and cultural consumption, whereas sociologists of education give attention to recruitment patterns. In the first tradition, analyses of cultural practices are often elaborate, while education is reduced to aggregated, often one-dimensional, measures, i.e. level of education (e.g. Bennett et al., 2009; Roose, van Eijck, & Lievens, 2012; Bonnet, Lebaron, & Le Roux, 2015; cf. Broady, 2002). The second tradition entails more sophisticated analyses of education, but tends to use crude measures of cultural capital (or resources), often conflated with educational capital in the form of the highest level of education of the parents (cf. Börjesson & Broady, 2006; Thomsen, 2008). Our aim is to bridge these traditions in order to focus more clearly on the relationship between education and culture, applying a sufficiently differentiated conception of both. We will do this by investigating two states of cultural capital distinguished by Bourdieu, firstly the embodied state, which we study as expressed in cultural practices and tastes among students in the elite subfield of Swedish higher education, and, secondly, the institutionalised state as expressed in such students' enrolment in different study programmes at different sites of learning. By doing this, we opt for a more precise understanding of both the use and importance of culture in the habitus formation taking place at elite study programmes and institutions, and the propensity of elite programmes and institutions to produce *corps* with specific cultural practices and tastes. Thus, by pointing out higher education institutions as crucial seats of production of cultural practices and tastes our study can be seen as a contribution to the sociology of education but also to the sociology of culture.

It is not evident that the close link between education and culture revealed by Bourdieu and his collaborators fifty years ago is to be found in all societies at all times. For instance, the massive expansion of the educational system in general and higher education in particular have changed the relative value of higher education degrees (see Collins, 1979; Börjesson, Ahola, Helland, & Thomsen, 2014; Melldahl, 2015) and altered the relation between education and culture (Coulangeon, 2011). However, this argument can be used to support our strategy to investigate the elite segment. The decrease in the relative value of higher education in general has been accompanied by an increasing importance of its elite sector, at least in the Swedish case (Börjesson & Broady, 2016). Thus, if there is one area where we still can expect a close link between education and culture it is elite programmes and institutions. In comparison to other national contexts, France probably represents an extreme case where the educational system plays a fundamental role in the social reproduction and where the link between education and culture is extraordinarily strong. Sweden would arguably represent the opposite extreme with its less socially hierarchised educational system (Börjesson & Broady, 2016; Börjesson, Broady, Dalberg, & Lidegran, 2016; Erikson & Jonsson, 1996) and weaker links between education and culture.¹ In Sweden the content and form of cultural capital is thus more disputed and its relative value more contested. It is therefore interesting to ask if and how culture also in Sweden is relevant for social distinctions. A number of recent studies in Scandinavian countries on the relation between cultural consumption and social positions have shown a clear homology between the space of lifestyles and the class structure (Prieur, Rosenlund, & Skjott-Larsen, 2008; Hjellbrekke, Jarness, & Korsnes, 2015).

In order to analyse significant differences as regards the cultural practices and tastes of students in Swedish higher education, we have combined two different veins in the sociological oeuvre of Pierre Bourdieu. On the one hand, we use the detailed and nuanced methodology for understanding lifestyles presented in "L'anatomie du goût" (Bourdieu & de Saint Martin, 1976) and *La distinction* (Bourdieu, 1979a), where those are related to consumption of food, holidays, cars, et cetera, variables used to construct a space of lifestyles. On the other hand, we draw on the notion of educational fields (here a shorthand for spaces of educational institutions) as outlined in "Agrégation et ségrégation. Le champ des grandes écoles et le champ du pouvoir" (Bourdieu & de Saint Martin, 1987) and in *La noblesse d'État* (Bourdieu, 1989).

One of the conclusions of our study is that even in a relatively egalitarian country like Sweden culture plays a crucial role in lifestyle formation among students in the elite subfield of higher education and that there exist a strong link between cultural capital in its embodied state and in its institutionalised state. We will put forth the argument that culture is very much what is at stake *within* this exclusive part of the educational system, and that the different educational milieus are vital for producing different cultural tastes and practices, that, in turn, reproduce differences between the various social fields and the field of power towards which the students aspire.

2. Theoretical and methodological points of departure

At the centre of our study stands the notion of cultural capital and its relation to education. In this section we will expand on the definition of cultural capital (Section 2.1). Furthermore, we will relate the capital concept to the field and space concepts (Section 2.2). This parallels with our choice of Specific Multiple Correspondence Analysis as the principal method (Section 2.3).

¹ One indication of this is that the literary canon taught in Swedish upper secondary school has changed profoundly during the 20th century, while it has remained more stable in France with a persisting focus on classical literature (Englund, 1997). Another piece of evidence is the evaporating link between educational capital and teacher education: smaller proportions of sons and daughters and of students with good credentials choose to enter teaching programmes (Bertilsson, 2014). An alternative research strategy for the Swedish case would be to more clearly separate educational capital from cultural capital (Lidegran, 2009).

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