Abstract

This chapter explores the link between culture and stratification, particularly how cultural processes shape access to social, material, and symbolic rewards. An underlying premise is that social institutions such as the educational system are not culture-neutral, but tend to privilege the culture of the upper-middle classes, making it comparatively easier for the upper class to successfully navigate them. After differentiating between status situations, class situations, and status culture, the chapter documents the linkage between status cultures and dominant institutions. It concludes by calling attention to the need for more research on culture and stratification in non-Western contexts.
Introduction

In contemporary sociology, the link between culture and stratification is a burgeoning area of research. Breaking with “materialist” forms of analysis in which culture is seen as epiphenomenal with respect to outcomes related to stratification and inequality, sociologists today are busy investigating the myriad ways in which seemingly inconsequential, and thus easy to miss, cultural processes operate to modulate access to social, material, and symbolic rewards (Savage, Warde, and Devine 2005; Lamont, Beljean, and Clair 2014). This work becomes more important as culture-infused arenas such as schools have come to acquire a predominant role in determining individual life chances across the world (Frank and Meyer 2007). A key insight here is that social institutions, especially educational institutions, are not culture-neutral but rather are saturated with the culture of the upper-middle classes, thus making it easier for upper-class individuals to successfully navigate them while making it harder for working-
class individuals to do so (Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum 2008; Pareau 2011; Stephens et al. 2012; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013).

**Status situations, class situations, and status cultures**

The analytic foundations of modern culture and stratification research are rooted in the key distinction, first laid out by German sociologist Max Weber, between an individual’s “status situation” and “class situation.” Weber defines status situation as “every typical component of the fate of those individuals determined by means of a specific positive or negative social estimation” on the part of others (Weber 1994:113). The class situation, on the other hand, is best characterized by “opportunities to gain sustenance and income” (Weber 1946:301). Research in culture and stratification centers on specifying the ways in which an individual’s status situation is affected by, and in turn affects, their class situation. Because status “expresses itself in the specifically stylized way of life to which all aspiring members [of the relevant group] are expected to adhere” (Weber 1994:114), the sociological analysis of status situations in culture and stratification research merges with the study of the origins and consequences of distinct status cultures. In addition, because privileged status groups sustain and reproduce their position largely via the “monopolization of [access to] ideal and material goods” (Weber 1924:117), studies of culture and stratification are deeply tied to the sociology of cultural consumption and cultural taste (Peterson 2005; Khan 2011).
As a result, contemporary work on the link between culture and stratification conceives of the lifestyle characteristics of a status culture as being composed of a complex of elements, including values, skills, habits, and worldviews. Research thus endeavors to connect status-based cultural antecedents (e.g., an individual’s current or previous status situation, as well as socialization into specific status cultures) to stratification outcomes further down the line. These outcomes are primarily trajectories of achievement or exclusion within the dominant institutional settings in charge of determining life chances and distributing stratification-relevant rewards (e.g., schools, labor markets, work organizations). This emphasis differentiates culture and stratification work from what sociologists usually refer to as “class analysis,” which usually looks at the relationship between contemporary (or past) and future class situations (Savage et al. 2005).

The emergence of status cultures

We can divide contemporary research on the culture and stratification linkage into two broad strands. First is work seeking to examine how different status cultures emerge from specific interactional, institutional, and cultural processes, including material conditioning by the relevant class situation. This work, in turn, seeks to link distinct status cultures to other dominant institutions in society seen as relevant for stratification outcomes. The “linkage hypothesis” – that status cultures affect an individual’s trajectory and rewards within society’s major
stratifying institutions – is thus central to contemporary culture and stratification research.

**Socialization into status cultures**

The work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has generated a major rethinking of both the “dynamic” (process) and “results” (outcomes) of the phenomenon of differential socialization across status groups. While retaining a focus on the origins of bounded class cultures in differentiated societies, Bourdieu differs from classical work on this subject (Collins 1975) in conceiving of socialization into status cultures as less driven by a reflective process of value or worldview inculcation (e.g., Kohn 1977) or a linguistically mediated process of transmission of class-specific “cultural codes” (e.g., Bernstein 1971) and more on an implicit, embodied, unconscious immersion in a holistic social, symbolic, and material environment.

This implicit immersion is driven by a child’s exposure to parental practices keyed to instruction and socialization; her active, bodily interaction with material objects and built environments; and her exposure to specific experiences. The acquisition of such tacit competences leads to the development of an unconscious, undirected (but ultimately systematically organized) set of expectations, styles of appreciation, schemes of perception, and systems of practical action in the world – what Bourdieu called the “class habitus.” The habitus is an enduring (but dynamic) cognitive structure that produces thoughts, reactions (aesthetic, cognitive, and moral) and choices (e.g., what to buy, what to
major in, who to marry) that is in tune with (and attempts to recreate, within limits) the environment in which it developed (Bourdieu 1990). This explains why we can recurrently observe individuals socialized within distinct status environments “constructing class positions for themselves . . . without awareness that they . . . [are] engaged in doing so” (Bettie 2003:190).

Parental socialization into working- and middle-class status cultures

Annette Lareau’s (2011) recent work on the emergence of specific orientations within working- and middle-class households largely tracks this conception of how status cultures emerge. She shows that by adopting a distinct, ideal-typical orientation toward child-rearing, middle-class parents are able to transmit distinct cultural advantages to their children. Middle-class parents rely on what Lareau calls the logic of “concerted cultivation,” which involves constant participation in structured extracurricular educational, cultural, and athletic activities outside the home. Through these forms of social and cultural participation middle-class children come to be endowed with a set of habitual social skills – such as the ability to treat adults in position of authority as equals – allowing them to more readily navigate dominant institutions (such as schools) and more fully customize them for their needs.

Working-class parents adopt a different posture toward child-rearing: the logic of “natural growth.” Here, the primary parental responsibility is to provide for the child’s basic needs (e.g., food, shelter, safety). Because the natural growth
approach sees children’s talents as inherent in their person, following a logic of spontaneous maturation and expression rather than a logic of cultivation and learning, there is less perceived need for constant, competitive cultivation of special skills. This leads the child to spend more of her time among familiar same-age kin in unstructured domestic activities rather than developing the competencies needed to navigate established social institutions. When it comes to interacting with adults and professionals in positions of power in these institutions, working-class children are thus at a distinct interactional disadvantage because they cannot insist on a customized experience better suited to their individual needs. This is why schools come to be experienced by working-class children (across categories of race and gender) as impersonal and removed from everyday concerns; schools become sites of generic restraint rather than sites that facilitate personal growth.

Importantly, Lareau demonstrates that status cultures can be transmitted from parent to children in a largely implicit way. In fact, sometimes the status culture that is actually transmitted clashes with the culture that parents believe they are transmitting via their explicit instruction and guidance. For instance, [Weininger and Lareau (2009)](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1521-3930.2009.00472.x) set out to test [Kohn’s (1977)](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1521-3930.1977.tb01774.x) proposal that middle-class parents emphasize an orientation toward “autonomy,” “self-direction,” and “freedom from control” in relation to established authorities and conventions whereas working-class parents emphasize an orientation toward “conformity,” “obedience,” and adaptation to extant rule structures. Their research, triangulating between interview-based and observational data, uncovers a paradox: the Kohn prediction seems to hold true only when it comes to adult self-reports of parenting
style and socialization goals or in terms of what parents explicitly say to their kids. In these circumstances, middle-class parents do seem to emphasize a language of autonomy and independence (e.g., negotiation with children over rules, emphasizing choice behavior) and working-class parents do seem to emphasize a discourse of obedience (e.g., issuing directives without qualification, justifying decisions by reference to positional authority), especially when it came to intergenerational interactions within the household.

However, when it came to socialization processes linking the child to institutional realms outside of the household, middle-class parents spent countless hours attempting to shape their children’s behavioral dispositions in a direction of conformity and adaptation to institutional environments populated by adults in authority, and maximizing the amount of “leisure” time spent in structured (rule-governed) activities under tight supervision and control. This type of enculturation occurred via both explicitly symbolized interaction (e.g., the issuing of verbal directives) and, most significantly, via the enmeshing of the child in organizational structures endowed with habitual routines attuned to the spatial and temporal rules of the institution, sometimes involving the direct manipulation of the body. On the other hand, working-class parents followed a practical rule of “autonomy” in which children spent the majority of their time in unstructured self- or peer-directed activities with very little in the way of intergenerational interaction. Here there was little to no exposure to practical enculturation dedicated to managing or navigating institutional environments controlled by adults in authority positions outside of the household.
In sum, while sometimes being hard to discern, systematically distinct class and status cultures continue to exist and reproduce themselves across generations. This reproduction does not need to be intentional or instrumental, as it can happen as a result of habitual dispositions. Socialization within these status cultures, in its turn, has important repercussions for the educational trajectories of youth.

The linkage between status cultures and dominant institutions

A primary warrant for studying the origins of status cultures for culture and stratification researchers has to do with the non-arbitrary links between status cultures and the trajectory of individuals in the social institutions most likely to affect stratification outcomes in contemporary society. One of Bourdieu’s (1984, 1998) key contributions was to show how recognized and unrecognized linkages between status cultures and dominant institutional domains contribute to the stratification processes. His analysis combines Weber’s emphasis on status situations as partially autonomous and capable of driving class situations, Marx’s emphasis on power and cultural hegemony, and Durkheim’s emphasis on the social origins of shared systems of thought and classification. For Bourdieu, status-based advantages produced within the family and in formal occupation-based class cultures come to be inscribed in the very classificatory framework of the institutions in charge of sorting persons into positions that monopolize the extraction of class-based advantages.
From this perspective, all of the major institutions of market-based societies (e.g., education, science, art, the state) carry the “imprint” of the upper-middle-class status groups largely responsible for their emergence (Collins 1979; Stephens et al. 2012). It is thus impossible achieve a state of “universality” that is not grounded on some delimited, and usually privileged, status culture; what happens instead is that different status groups compete to for this claim to “universal” representation. Status group reproduction occurs when members of certain (privileged) status cultures transmit the habits, competencies, and dispositions most readily recognized and rewarded by social institutions, as discussed earlier. This provides senior members of dominant status cultures with a probabilistic advantage in terms of ensuring the success of their children within those institutional worlds, thus guaranteeing some form of intergenerational transmission of the symbolic means of institutional authority and control.

**Cultural capital as linkage mechanism**

The term “cultural capital” was introduced by Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) in order to better understand patterns of inequality – such as “educational inheritance” or the differential ability of the sons and daughters of educated parents to be judged as better students by their teachers – in educational outcomes in French schools. The concept of cultural capital has nevertheless enjoyed a much more flexible and generalized applicability, mainly due to the impact of Bourdieu’s (1984) classic study *Distinction*, in which he used the concept to explain differential rates and styles of engagement in the (institutionally
legitimated) arts. The book’s key argument is that cultural elites display an “aesthetic disposition” (a valued way of acquiring and displaying knowledge) that functions as cultural capital because it is the most institutionally legitimated (e.g., through its reinforcement by educational institutions) way of appropriating aesthetic goods, although it is not the only one. Bourdieu concluded that it was this differential capacity to apply aestheticizing cognitive schemes to the different symbolic goods produced by the symbol-production fields of the more legitimate (and sometimes the popular) arts that served as the primary differentiating factor among arts consuming audiences in late-modern societies.

According to Bourdieu, any set of status-based dispositions embodied in habitus that produce advantage when deployed in a given institutional setting, counts as “capital.” Thus, dispositions that facilitate the appropriation of collectively validated cultural goods at any historical point (e.g., the “fine arts”) or the ability to master those forms of linguistic expression that are accorded most value in the larger society (e.g., “idiomatic” English; [Bettie 2003; Carter 2005]) – can be thought of as dominant cultural or linguistic capital when they provide the children of culturally advantaged class fractions with the ability to produce styles of self-presentation that are perceived (consciously or implicitly) by institutional gatekeepers as indicating the mark of a superior student, endowed with sophistication and intelligence.

In the Anglo-American literature, there are two primary conceptualizations of cultural capital informing contemporary theory and research on the culture and stratification linkage. One, partially based on Bourdieu’s (1986) influential formulation, conceives of cultural capital as an aptitude, a
proficiency, or a skill acquired in the combined realms of the upper-middle-class family and the school system. The other major conceptualization of cultural capital is concerned with addressing what are perceived to be ambiguities in this formulation. From an alternative perspective focused on symbolic boundaries, Lamont and Lareau (1988:164) define cultural capital as “the institutionalized repertoire of high status signals” useful for purposes of marking and drawing symbolic boundaries in a given social context. This definition attempts to forge a connection to a Weberian theory of status group closure: whatever counts as cultural capital are those symbolic resources that are actively mobilized by members of groups or class fractions to establish their difference from (and superiority over) other groups. Carter (2005) shows how both of these definitions can be empirically relevant and put to illuminating theoretical use. In her studies of economically disadvantaged minority youth, she argues that what counts as cultural capital is context-specific and that how cultural capital is deployed determines its usefulness. Thus command of both dominant (institutionalized) cultural patterns (e.g., ability to speak in ways typical of the white majority) and familiarity with minority cultural patterns (“black” slang; taste for certain musical and sartorial styles associated with African American oppositional youth cultures) can serve as cultural capital. The former allows minority youth to navigate their way through established institutions (schools, the workplace, the law), while the latter can be used to claim “authentic” membership in their ethnic subculture. In this manner, cultural capital can be used not just a boundary-drawing resource, but also as a vehicle for claiming ownership of desirable ethnic and racial identities. More
importantly, it is precisely those youth who develop the ability to “straddle” dominant and non-dominant forms of cultural capital who appear to reap the benefits of acceptance by both ethnic peers and representatives of conventional success.

In a related study, Warikoo (2011) shows that a similar model of multiple forms of cultural capital applies in a comparative context. In a study of first generation minority youth in London and New York City, Warikoo shows that fashion styles and musical tastes required to gain status among same-age peers, mostly derived from a now globally diffused hip-hop culture mainly produced by American black artists, are often interpreted by school authorities on both sides of the Atlantic as signifying “opposition” to school norms and link to “street” criminality. Yet, Warikoo finds little evidence that engagement with this sort of non-dominant cultural capital is associated with anti-school norms or less desire to do well academically. In this respect, the meanings immigrant minority youth give to certain forms of cultural engagement and styles of self-presentation can be systematically out of step with the meanings conveyed to adult authorities within and outside of the school context, with important consequences for the institutional trajectories of immigrant youth.

“Omnivorousness” and the new elite culture of “tolerant distinction”

A paradox besetting the sociological study of elite status cultures is the rise of what Olivier (2008) once provocatively referred to as “conspicuous openness to
diversity” and what most scholars, following Peterson and Kern (1996), refer to as “omnivorousness.” This is the tendency on the part of contemporary cultural elites to claim a “multicultural” openness to a wide variety of aesthetic experiences involving a seemingly broad cross-section of cultural goods. Countless studies, across dozens of national settings using survey and interview methods to capture the stated preferences and associated motivational accounts of elites, find that high-status culture today seems to be characterized by an openness to cultural diversity and a refusal to reject specific cultural genres, forms, or objects (Lizardo and Skiles 2012).

In contrast, cultural analysts have observed that in spite of the ascendance of the language of multiculturalism – tolerance, respect for diversity, and non-comparability across forms of participation – elites continue to engage aesthetic objects in ways that seem to be both class-coded and linked to class-specific experiences (Khan 2011; Friedman and Kuipers 2013). When suitably prodded, the same elites betray an implicit preference for complexity, formal innovation, and a purposive authorial intention in cultural works even when engaging objects and experiences where these qualities are not to be expected (Holt 1998; Atkinson 2011). In other words, while the stated culture of contemporary elites is definitely attuned to the values of inclusion and cross-cultural expression, they continue to engage an ever-expanding set of cultural objects in inherently class-marked (i.e., exclusionary) ways (Johnston and Baumann 2014). This persists despite the fact that elites lack a coherent discourse marking their cultural engagement (or even themselves) as particularly distinct (Khan 2011). The gap between habit and discourse notwithstanding, it is clear that there has been a conservation of modes
of cultural consumption distinctive to high-status groups such that the ways elites engage cultural goods can be understood as an extension of the set of exclusionary practices first developed in the traditional “fine arts” (Lizardo and Skiles 2012).

Consequently, forms of aesthetic appreciation and judgment linked to elite status cultures continue to be reliably fostered and transmitted in upper-middle-class households, and concomitantly predicted by the usual markers of privilege and advantage – without explicit exclusionary reference to alternative modes of engagement and without the transmission of an elaborate ideology anointing elite preferences as superior. As with the case of the transmission of paradoxical class cultures noted earlier (Weininger and Lareau 2009), the seeming paradox of high-status cultural consumption is important to assess critically because, left unexamined, it suggests that elite ways of talking about culture are synonymous with elite culture itself, with the corresponding (and problematic assumption) that status cultures do not make a difference for lifestyle practices (Atkinson 2011). One solution to this impasse is to recognize that elite cultural capital is a complex amalgam of both explicit discourses and non-explicit practices not necessarily liable to exhibit strong coherence and unity.

**Moral repertoires of evaluations as constituents of status cultures**

As we have seen, much research attempting to conceptualize the role of culture in marking divisions across status follows Weber and Bourdieu in keying in on the
role of cultural aptitudes and lifestyle consumption patterns. Michèle Lamont’s work (1992, 2000) has presented a creative and influential corrective to Bourdieu’s emphasis on cultural aptitudes as the main “marker” of symbolic boundaries across status groups. (A related emphasis on moral dispositions as a distinct part of the class “habitus” has also been recently developed by Sayer [2005]).

In *Money, Morals and Manners*, an ambitious comparative analysis of the boundary-drawing discourses of members of the French and American upper-middle class, Lamont (1992) argues that upper-middle-class American men tend to draw boundaries between themselves and others on the basis of moral and economic criteria (e.g., hard work, economic achievement) whereas their French counterparts are more likely to rely on cultural criteria (e.g., aesthetic taste, abstract intellectualism). For upper-middle-class white men, then, boundary work – and even the operation of cultural capital more narrowly defined – is shaped by national context, reflecting national differences in the place/role accorded cultural concerns in the broader society as well as differences in how professional work is related to the market.

The importance of moral boundaries comes to full analytic fruition in *The Dignity of Working Men* (Lamont 2000), an equally ambitious comparative study of the French and American working class. Here, Lamont analyzes how nationally and ethnically specific “institutionalized cultural repertoires” (2000:243) come to regulate the boundary-drawing strategies of working-class men both when aiming “upwards” toward members of the upper-middle class or “laterally” toward perceived as undeserving members of excluded racial and ethnic groups. Lamont
shows that it is impossible to understand these patterns of exclusion/inclusion and the role played by values such as “hard work” or “honesty” without getting a handle on the distinct, context-specific cultural models deployed by different fractions of the working class, both within a given national context (e.g., black versus white men in the US) or across national societies (e.g., the relatively higher emphasis of French working-class men on cross-racial solidarity based on trade unionism).

**Conclusion: broadening and deepening the research agenda**

As we have seen, contemporary analysts of the culture-stratification link are engaged in an active research agenda, seeking to understand the origins of status cultures and their consequences for individual trajectories in dominant institutions. A key focus has been on uncovering the cultural processes through which status-based advantage are transmitted across generations or produced and reproduced in concrete contexts (Lareau 2011; Stephens et al. 2012; Lamont et al. 2014).

Much of this work, even that taking a more comparative approach (e.g., Lamont 1992, 2000; Warikoo 2011), is centered on the Euro-American West, and is thus not as fully geographically and cross-culturally extensive as it could be. Although recent moves toward the study of “repertoires of evaluation” (Lamont 2012) promise to help expand the field, we have very limited knowledge of the relationship between status and class situations outside of the Euro-American
context. We know especially little about how cultural repertoires deployed for the demarcation of symbolic boundaries operate in non-Western low-income or developing countries (but see Üstüner and Holt 2010).

Outside of sociology, there is a vibrant and growing literature on culture consumption and global media in anthropology and communication focusing on non-Western contexts, but few researchers in global media studies make use of fundamental sociological insights on the relationship between status-based stratification and lifestyle. An exception is the work of Joseph Straubhaar (2007), who has productively applied insights from Bourdieu’s cultural capital framework to study the relative appeal of global versus local cultural products in Brazil. He finds that cultural and economic capital have a strong effect in inducing media choices for “cultural proximate” symbolic goods, with those culturally advantaged individuals gravitating toward “global” culture and those endowed with less cultural capital preferring regional and local fare. This work takes a good first step toward greater dialogue between globalization scholars and those studying culture and stratification.

Further progress in the field requires both a continuation of work looking at the processes that generate distinct status cultures and how membership in these cultures accrues status-based advantages for some groups and disadvantages for others (Lareau 2011; Stephens et al. 2012). It is critical to continue examining the increasingly complex linkages connecting status group membership to success within (for the privileged) and exclusion from (for the less privileged) dominant institutions (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). It is also important to begin theorizing emergent institutional sites within which new forms of status-based
exclusion are solidified (see for instance Illouz [2007] on the increasing importance of middle-class forms of “emotional capital” in contemporary workplaces), so that we may shed light on the sometimes surreptitious ways in which institutional logics based on particular class cultures come to acquire society-wide authority with consequences for social stratification.

In addition, we need more research that spotlights the fine-grained processes responsible for the transmission of cultural resources within and across generations and institutional sites. There remain gaps in our knowledge regarding the concrete realization and operation of the cultural and interactional mechanisms that generate status-based privilege and make possible the intergenerational transmission of cultural advantage, as well as their role in governing access to sites where material and symbolic rewards are allocated—such as hiring for prestigious jobs (Rivera 2012) or succeeding at elite schools (Khan 2011). It is only by having a clear handle on the micro-mechanisms and processes of status-based reproduction that we can understand the origins of the apparently “natural gifts” that allow members of privileged status groups to effectively navigate key institutional settings and acquire the social certification necessary for shaping the life chances of everyone in contemporary societies.

References


