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Comment on John Goldthorpe/1

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by Paul M. de Graaf

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This essay on the sociological literature in which Pierre Bourdieu's notions on cultural capital are used is very instructive. In my opinion, the essay's main quality is that it so clearly stresses that a distinction can and should be made between two types of research inspired by Bourdieu's publications. First, there is research using Bourdieu's notion of the cultural mismatch between the cultural backgrounds of children from low-educated families and the cultural values and practices that are expected in schools. Second, there is research (it may be better to say that there is literature, because this type of research typically lacks empirical foundation) using Bourdieu's grand theory about the cultural reproduction of social inequality. This second literature argues that higher status groups have used the educational system in such a way that social inheritance remains strong in a modernizing society in which achievement is replaced by ascription as the main road to economic success. The essay is very clear in showing that sociological research in which hypotheses are tested seriously and research which prefers grand schemes and holistic views of society are different enterprises. In my reaction to Goldthorpe's essay I am not going to defend the grand theories with whom I have no affinity whatsoever myself. Instead, I would like to stress that it is more fruitful to write up what I have learnt from Bourdieu's work and how I think we should proceed in explaining educational stratification.

I think that Goldthorpe is making an accurate observation when he argues that the idea of a cultural difference between home and school cultures is not completely new. However, I think that Bourdieu has brought this idea forward in a vigorous way, and that research literature studying the working of cultural capital in educational careers cannot do without references to Bourdieu. After all, Bourdieu has been the

main advocate of this idea. The references Goldthorpe is giving to earlier research are relevant, but the idea that cultural capital gives access to elite groups and their institutions (like higher education or professions) is very much Bourdieu's own invention, and this is credited by citations, just the way it should go in normal science. Not citing Bourdieu, would be very much like arguing that Gary Becker's work on human capital is not new because others also have observed that people go to school for the diploma's.

I follow Goldthorpe in positioning myself in the camp of researchers who have tested Bourdieu's idea that parental cultural capital has an effect on children's educational decisions, over and above the effects of the standard indicators of social background, such as parental occupation, income, and especially above education. This line has offered valuable insights in the ways families evaluate the costs of extended educational participation for their offspring. Going to school does not only bring financial costs, but also cultural costs, and students and their families take all of these costs into account when making decisions on how to proceed.

I think Bourdieu's ideas about the cultural mismatch between the absence of affinity with formal culture at home and the cultural practices of schools are very important, even if his macro-sociological notions are invalid. In note 7 of his essay, Goldthorpe comments that "in a Bourdeusien world in which the children of subordinate classes are alienated from the educational system and deprived of all hope or aspiration for success within it, the expansion of the system would then be disproportionately exploited by children of dominant classes, can class differentials would widen", which as Goldthorpe notes is obvious not the case empirically. On the contrary, the available evidence suggests that the class differentials are decreasing. The point that educational expansion is not explained (or perhaps cannot be explained) in Bourdieu's analysis may be well taken, but in the research done by DiMaggio, myself, and others, this is not the issue at all. We were inspired by Bourdieu's ideas about the cultural mismatch, and I especially like the idea that for some children school is not as much fun as it is for other children. As soon as they can leave school with a satisfactory diploma they go. And no, these children are certainly not deprived of all hope. They just would prefer to leave school as soon as possible.

In modern times, educational attainment is needed to get a decent job, and most children indeed go to school to get a diploma, but still many children from culturally deprived origins do not pursue an educational career that would bring them to tertiary education. In the Netherlands, many children of lower educated parents choose for tracks that lead to vocational training on the intermediate level. Bourdieu's publications taught me that this is not because they are not smart enough, but because higher education is something they do not feel familiar with. The children and

their parents are anxious that they will not feel at home in higher education, that there will be a cultural distance between themselves and the teaching staff, or that they will not pass the exams. This is a cultural explanation of educational stratification.

I would like to go further in this direction by speculating about what children with lower educated parents would do if it becomes necessary to go to the higher forms of secondary education to secure a diploma needed for a satisfactory labour market career. Since education (partially) is a positional good, this necessity may very well develop, since educational expansion reinforces itself, and since as a consequence the values of diplomas are subject to inflation. I think that these children would adapt, reluctantly, and, if smart enough, would proceed to tertiary education. To some extent, this is already happening in many countries. This is not because they are so enthusiastic about going to school until they are 22 years old, but because they have to. In the Netherlands we observe that such children opt for the lower variant in higher education (higher vocational training) and not for universities, which indicates that they avoid the unfamiliar cultural climate at the academy.

John Goldthorpe and colleagues have developed another line of explanation for the lack of ambition among working class children to pursue higher education: "Risk aversion". It goes without saying that both the "cultural mismatch" hypothesis and the "risk aversion" hypothesis need rigorous testing. We should collect data in which the variables speculated about (risk aversion, cultural capital, school culture) are measured and estimate the decisive models. And we should integrate the ideas in a theory on a higher level, for example by combining economic and cultural aspects of educational decisions in a rational choice framework. For this purpose it does not help much to criticize contradictions and inconsistencies in Bourdieu's books about social reproduction on the macro-level. Let's not cite Bourdieu for his grand theory of stable patterns of social reproduction but for his ideas about the relationship between cultural taste and social class, and his ideas about the ways in which culture contributes to social inequality.

“Cultural Capital”: Some Critical Observations

Abstract: “Cultural capital” is a key concept in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. It plays a central role in Bourdieu’s account of the generation of class inequalities in educational attainment, which has evident affinities with those advanced by other sociologists of education; but also in his far more ambitious – though empirically unsustainable – theory of social reproduction. Much confusion can then be shown to arise from a failure to distinguish between the uses of the concept in the two quite differing contexts of what might be labelled as Bourdieu “domesticated” and Bourdieu “wild”. Researchers using the concept in the former context often fail to appreciate its radical nature and, in turn, the full extent to which their findings undermine Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction; while those who would wish to understand the concept in the latter context have difficulty in showing its continuing fitness for research purposes, given the failure of the larger theory in which it is embedded. Advantage would follow from leaving the language of “cultural capital” to those who still seek to rescue this theory, and otherwise replacing it with a more differentiated conceptual approach.

Keywords: education, cultural capital, parental resources, social mobility, careers.

Paul M. de Graaf is professor of sociology at Tilburg University (Netherlands). His research interests include social stratification and mobility, the sociology of education, the sociology of the family, survey research, and values and norms. His Ph.D. thesis (Utrecht, 1987) was on the impact of parental financial and cultural resources in educational careers in the Netherlands, and the main conclusion was the the cultural resources have much stronger effects on educational outcomes than financial resources. After his Ph.D. research he has been a guest at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin (Germany), and the Departments of Sociology at UCLA and Stanford University in the United States. From 1994-2006 he has been affiliated to the University at Nijmegen (Netherlands), and since January 1st he is responsible for the European Values Study (www.europeanvalues.nl). His publication list can be found at www.uvt.nl/webwjs/show.html?anr=309109.