Title: Cultural Capital and Academic Success: An Empirical Analysis of Underlying Mechanisms.

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Abstract:

A prominent explanation of the social gradient in educational achievement is Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory. Bourdieu argues that children from families with a low socioeconomic status have low educational achievements because they lack cultural capital, which represents a crucial resource in the education system. Indeed, previous studies have frequently shown that children’s cultural capital relates to academic outcomes. However, it remains unclear how children convert their cultural capital into achievement. While Bourdieu argued that cultural capital influences academic outcomes primarily by symbolizing class membership and biasing teacher’s grades, other researchers have proposed the alternative explanation that children’s cultural capital absorption directly translates into academic skills.

Cultural capital has been defined and operationalized multiple ways. A prominent definition of cultural capital was proposed by Lamont and Lareau (1988:156): Cultural capital are "[...] institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion [...]". In this dissertation, I will focus on children’s leisure activities as one type of cultural capital. I will examine to which extent certain types of leisure activities (e.g., high cultural activities, organized leisure activities) promote academic success by fostering skills (cognitive and non-cognitive) and symbolizing higher-class membership.

Using large-scale data sets such as the German National Educational Panel Study, I will try to unpack the black box of cultural capital conversion. Only if we understand how cultural capital leads to advantages in school, we can propose fruitful implications for interventions.