

The Triple Helix of Social Hierarchy: Bourdieu's Three Forms of Capital

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1 Introduction

You don't need to be a demographer to know that your current probability of dying is far smaller if you are rich, healthy and young than the opposite. Social inequalities in the risk of dying were noted by Farr (see Whitehead, 1992) in the 19th century and, at least since Antonovsky's (1967) seminal article, demographers have spent considerable effort documenting this apparently obvious relationship, at various levels of aggregation, from the individual to the nation state. Nonetheless, the concepts of social inequality, and hierarchy, the nature of the resources which give the rich their advantage, have been poorly conceptualised, it being generally assumed that social entities, be they people or places, can be ranked from those with least of whatever it takes, to those with the most.

The roads of social class analysis all lead back to Marx, though he himself never succeeded in defining classes operationally (see e.g. Chapter LII in Marx, 1962). The focus of Marx's analysis is on class as an exploitative relationship (Marx, [1887] n.d., Ch. VII) and the consequent struggle over the distribution of the fruits of human labour (values). The challenge, in the ensuing dialogue with the ghost of Marx, has been to translate this relationship into a hierarchy of social statuses, or positions within the social structure, while, incidentally, moving from a dynamic analysis of social change over time, to a synchronic analysis of social relationships at one given point of time. We shall touch on a few of the major landmarks on this journey, culminating in the tripartite division of capital proposed by Bourdieu.

The first major attempt to describe the social hierarchy was also the first to challenge the simple, uniscalar, hierarchy. Weber (2009) proposed a ranking of individuals, based on their value in the labour market, what we today would term their human capital; and at the same time a ranking of the social groups to which these individuals belonged, based on the groups' social standing, or prestige, itself a slowly changing reflection of the average worth of individuals within the group. Thus, whereas the first (social classes) represented current achievements, the second (status, or *Stände*) had a more historical dimension, as well as acting as a brake (or negative feedback) on rapid social change, as group members acted in common to maintain their common advantage. Weber was thus saying that, even if the underlying, long term logic, of social stratification and social inequality is economic, its expression takes on many forms, some of which are economic, but others are more cultural, and related not so much to life chances as to life styles.

A more pragmatic approach was that of the English Registrar General, who, in his report for 1911, published a classification of occupations as a means of categorising major group differentials in demographic behaviour, mainly fertility, but also risks of dying. The scale identified, initially, six social classes, ranging

from professional through managers, skilled non-manual and manual occupations, to unskilled occupations. Although the ranking is nominally economic, in practice prestige considerations are no less important: in the advantage given to professionals over managers; and in the distinction between non-manual and manual occupations. On the one hand, these two skilled occupational groups are given the same rank (III). In practice, the non-manual group is always placed above the manual group, thus making clear the group's class advantage, even if incomes are often higher in the non-manual group. Other schema, based on type of occupation (Goldthorpe, 2010); social relations (Stewart et al., 1980), latent class analysis (Savage et al., 2013) or occupational prestige (Reiss et al., 1962) all lead to similar ranking, and to the same conflation of income, educational and (often) ethnic criteria in creating a unitary scale.

Recognising that there was more than one ranking criterion, Lenski (1954) suggested that individuals (and groups) could be separately ranked on a number of criteria which, though strongly correlated, were not necessarily totally congruent. While Lenski's main focus was on the effects of the degree of consistency of these rankings, or status crystallisation, the implication was that social ranking was, in Guttman's terms, a partially ordered scale (Shye, 1978; Levy, 1998), in which positions may be at the same overall rank, but of a different social composition, and thus incomparable. Three individuals, one with low education and high income, one with high education and low income and one with a middling level of both may all have an equivalent prestige score, yet their life chances are different, as are their life styles, and they are not socially equivalent.

A very different approach was taken by Wright (1978, 1985), who sought to translate the Marxian concept of exploitation and control of others' labour into concrete social positions. In order to be able to include not only the pure types, of bourgeoisie (investing capital, employing others); proletariat (no capital, employed by others) and petite bourgeoisie (self-employed with own minimal capital) he suggested locating these types at the nodes of an occupational triangle, with various contradictory locations in between. Over time, however, Wright moved towards what he termed a pragmatic realism (Wright, 2009: 101) in which Marxian and Weberian approaches complement, rather than compete with each other (ibid). Goldthorpe, too (2010), has called for a more nuanced approach to social inequality in which the landscape of social inequality, and its effects on individuals, needs to be viewed in terms of the distribution of material as well as more intangible resources.

2 Bourdieu and the Three Types of Capital

Social stratification, the location of individuals in a graduated social space, then, is multi-dimensional, and we are liable to lose important information if we simply project these different dimensions onto the single dimension of hierarchy, however close the correlation between them may be. At the same time, we need to understand the logic behind the various dimensions used to identify the social space, preferably in a manner that will enable inter-societal comparisons.

1. The Weberian *Stände* have generally been interpreted as ethnic groups, categories which have been socially constructed within the context of the society in question, and which represent socially meaningful distinctions, often with group level distinctions along other dimensions, such as income, occupation, education, and so on.
2. Many of the scales we have discussed, implicitly or explicitly, focus as much on levels of education as of income in determining social status. Education, certainly, is a key to social rewards, in particular

steady employment and high income (Wright, 1978), but education is more than just a correlate of material welfare. Education, and in particular educational certification, also creates socially meaningful membership categories, by ritually certifying individuals as members, and legitimises the social rights and meanings associated with these categories (Kamens, 1977). This legitimisation grants holders a certain role (prestige, rights, obligations) irrespective of their ability to realise the implied material potential in the labour market (Apodaca, 1998).

One solution, in the form of an overarching logic, has been provided by Bourdieu (1984; 1986), based on a generalisation of the Marxist concept of capital. Classes, argued Bourdieu, are groups of people living in the same social environment, with similar levels of property and subject to the same constraints. They have, in a word, the same class *habitus*, or social environment, which generates socially conditioned patterns of action, in the sense of voluntary behaviour using means to achieve ends (see Parsons, 1937). Ends and means, what we seek to achieve and how we seek to achieve it, are thus socially constructed in the course of interaction with others. *Habitus* thus represents or reflects a certain degree of control over the life-space, the leeway in which is never absolute but limited by the amount and types of capital at individuals' disposal.

Capital is here defined in a strictly Marxist sense, cumulated work which has taken on a substantive form and which enables whoever controls it to expropriate social energy, human work, either their own or that of someone else. Bourdieu identified three types of capital:

1. Economic capital: anything which can be directly translated into money and which thus creates a natural hierarchy of people, families and households according to their property rights (stocks of wealth they own, and flows of income);
2. Cultural capital: Education, and in particular, educational credentials, which create a social identity granting rights and obligations with no further proof of competence required. However, there is far more to cultural capital than just formal education, for the credentials identify the person as someone who has learnt what schools teach but do not certify: modes of behaviour and social relationships, and these are learnt as much in and around the home as in the school. Unlike economic capital, however, cultural capital has to be gained personally, it is transmitted, but cannot be bequeathed from one generation to the next. The signifier is the educational credential, but what is signified is socially valued knowledge, and what is socially valued is determined by those who hold power in the society.
3. Social capital: We live our lives in a network of relationships. Bourdieu made the obvious point that not all networks are equal, because the network partners are not equal. All networks, however, create a nexus of rights and obligations. They may be large or small, tight- or loose-knit and critically, they provide actors with access to resources that other network members can provide. Social capital is, then, the sum of such resources accessible through network relations. The network itself is built up over the lifetime, in school and university, the church, the neighbourhood, the army, work and many other locations, and is constantly revitalised through active participation in rituals and other common activities¹.

Bourdieu thus breaks down, and widens, the concept of capital beyond that of the strictly economic sphere. Capital is any resource which can be invested (used) in order to generate further capital; and while the economic form may be the most basic, the *ultimate* determining element (Engels, 1936), the other, more

¹This concept of social capital should not be confused with those developed by Putnam (2000) or Coleman (1988), which stem from very different sociological traditions (Siisiäinen, 2000; Tzanakis, 2013)

superstructural, forms are no less important if we wish to understand the structuring of human societies. There is no direct translation between the tangible (economic) and intangible forms of capital, and while, at the aggregate level, there is a tendency for the three to coincide, there will be various degrees of crystallisation at the individual level, or even within particular aggregations. Social classes are thus groups of individuals who are similar in their levels of economic resources (wealth, income); have similar cultural capital (formal and informal education, daily routines, child rearing patterns, forms of leisure time activities, and so on), and similar social capital (networks of relationships, possibly including ethnic and religious affiliation, etc.).

3 Operationalising (Measuring) Capital

The measurement of Economic and Cultural Capital is fairly straightforward with data available in most census and social surveys. These will include measures of income, home ownership, labour force status, occupation and possibly mortgage or rental levels for Economic Capital; and years education; highest degree; field of study and occupational sector, both of which can be scaled in terms of socially valued knowledge, for Cultural Capital. On the one hand, then, there is ample scope for the construction of scales or factors which will reflect these forms of capital. On the other hand, as the particular questions asked are liable to vary from one survey to another, the more fine tuned the scale, the less likely we are to be able to compare directly between different surveys, across time or from one jurisdiction to another, and we for this we may have to rely on a simple, but comparable measure, such as income (PPP converted), and highest educational certificate.

Social capital, by contrast, may be extremely difficult to estimate directly, and few have found adequate solutions. In the absence of network data, we are essentially trying to gauge who are the people who are likely to have well placed contacts, either directly or through intermediaries. In this respect, we may consider ethnic group membership and immigrant status to be useful proxies of the type of networks to which people have access, irrespective of their economic or cultural capital. Members of high-prestige ethnic groups are likely to hold an advantage over other ethnic groups; and the native-born over new immigrants, or even long-time immigrants who did not grow up in the country. Identifying the relevant groups, however, and even more, the group hierarchy, is going to require very careful knowledge of a particular country's ethnic structure.

4 Tripartite Capital and Mortality

This section will include an extensive review of research which has differentiated and compared the relative importance of different forms of Capital, either explicitly (as forms of Capital) or implicitly (separating out the effects of education and income, or ethnic group membership, for instance). My own work to date (on Australia, Belgium, France, Israel) suggests that

1. Cultural Capital has the greatest effect on the level of mortality
2. While all forms of capital operate to reduce mortality, they have different age-specific effects, with Cultural Capital reducing mortality at young relative to older adult ages; and Economic Capital at middle ages relative to younger and older adult ages. The effects of Social Capital are more difficult to generalise, and depend very much on how this is operationalised.

5 Conclusion

The importance of access to and control over resources, whether personal or at the group level, in reducing mortality is unquestionable. Bourdieu's distinction between three types of Capital: Economic, Cultural and Social suggests there is much yet to be learnt on the way in which such access to resources operates to reduce mortality and which interventions are most likely to reduce mortality inequality (but also why such interventions are unlikely to occur given current social structures).

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