

Cultural Difference Theory

Many sociologists are uneasy with argument made by cultural deprivation theorists that working class children are disadvantaged because their background inadequately prepared for education and with values that are actively counterproductive to learning. Such an explanation implies that working class children suffer from cultural a **deficit** that, some argue, is a clear case of victimology – blaming the victims of inequality for their problems.

In response to this problem, an alternative explanation for the influence of working class culture has been developed – known as **cultural difference theory**. In this explanation, the working class underachieve not because of a deficient background, but because there is a mismatch between the culture of the working class and that of the education system.

Bourdieu – Cultural Capital

An incredibly influential theorist in this area is the French sociologist **Bourdieu**. Conventional cultural difference theory sees the mismatch of cultures as an unfortunate coincidence, however Bourdieu, heavily influenced by **Marxism**, makes the more radical argument that the education system is purposefully biased towards the culture of dominant social classes, in order to ensure that existing patterns of power and privilege are passed on to the next generation. Bourdieu challenges the assumption that working class culture is somehow less effective than middle class culture and instead argues that the knowledge, skills, language and values of the working class are **devalued** by the education system. As a consequence, it becomes much easier for children with more affluent parents to succeed within the education system. This is because children from these backgrounds are equipped with the culture which is valued within the education system.

Based on this re-evaluation of working class culture, Bourdieu argues that possession of the dominant culture is as valuable as any financial advantage. He argued that in addition to economic capital, children from more affluent backgrounds are privileged with **cultural capital** which, through the education system, can be transformed into wealth and power.

Educational success of different social groups is, therefore, directly related to the amount of cultural capital that they possess. Consequently, middle-class students have higher attainment because they have been socialised into the same cultural capital that is valued in schools

Ball et al: Marketisation & Cultural Capital

Cultural capital is not simply the language and values that held by pupils, it also includes the experiences and abilities of both parents and children. In “Market Forces and Parental Choice”, **Ball, Bowe and Gerwitz¹ (1994)** examined the impact of marketisation on equality of educational opportunity, and found that cultural capital was an influential factor on choice of school.



1. How was marketisation supposed to improve educational standards?
2. How might cultural capital be influential in choice of school?

Ball et. al. concluded that there were three “types” of parental approach to choosing a school for their children:

- **Skilled Choosers** spent a lot of time finding out about different schools. They were more likely to move house or pay for private education if none of the local schools were of a high standard. This group are usually middle-class and some (such as teachers) had insider knowledge of the education system
- **Semi-Skilled Choosers** are just as concerned to get their children into schools, however they lacked the skill or experience of skilled choosers. For example, they were more likely to accept rumours and local reputations at face value.
- **Disconnected Choosers** were less inclined to be involved in the education market. They tend to send children to the closest school, often because they do not own a car or have easy access to public transport. They put more emphasis on the happiness of the child (e.g. sending them to the same secondary school as their friends from primary school) than the academic reputation of the school. Disconnected choosers tend to be working-class and are more likely to send their children to an under-subscribed school.



1. Offer an interpretation for this difference first using material deprivation theory, then cultural deprivation theory.
2. Now offer an alternative explanation using the notion of cultural capital.
3. How might the cultural capital argument be used to criticise Douglas’ view that working class parents were less interested in their children’s education?

Ball argues that middle-class parents are in a better position to get their children into good schools partly due to material factors (the ability to move house to be near such schools), but also because they had more cultural capital. Middle-class parents are likely to have more experience of the education system – usually having been educated themselves to degree level. With this experience, comes the confidence to “play the system” in order to ensure that children gain a place in the best schools. Ball also highlights that middle class parents are also highlights that middle-class parents are far more likely to have the contacts to get their children into their first choice of school.

This interpretation is a challenges Douglas’ assumption that working class parents are less interested in the education of their children. Ball suggests are more complex explanation which implies that working-class parents are not less interested, but less confident in engaging in their children’s education having never had the experience of education themselves.

¹ et. al. is Latin for “and others”, it is commonly used when papers have three or more authors. The convention is to write the name of the first author (or the main author) and follow it with et. al. (in italics).



Cultural Deprivation	Cultural Capital

1. Copy the above table on to an A4 sheet of paper. In the first column summarise the cultural deprivation interpretation of Bernstein’s theory of language. Try to break this down into bullet points which show the main steps of the argument
2. Now offer a reappraisal of the theory from a cultural capital stance. Again, try to break the argument down into key steps.
3. Think of **three** practical examples of how the cultural capital interpretation of working-class language might operate in a classroom context.
4. Other than language, try to think of **three** other applications of cultural capital theory.
5. For the following terms, suggest a definition: Economic Capital, Educational Capital, Cultural Capital, Economic Capital
6. Now suggest a way in which these four concepts might relate to each other.
7. Formulate a criticism of IQ testing based on cultural capital theory.



This study is an important example of how content from this unit can be used in other parts of the module.

1. Go back to your handout on the 1988 Reform Act; make a note to remind you of this study.
2. It is also another example of a Marxist theory of education. Also make a note of the study in the your notes on Marxism.
3. Write a section from an essay on equality of opportunity applying this study. It should include:
 - a. What marketisation is
 - b. How it was supposed to improve standards
 - c. Criticisms of the concept, using this study to back up your arguments

You should get into the habit of doing this whenever we come across a study with relevance to other areas of the education module.

Evaluation

- ✓ Cultural difference theory doesn't assume that working class culture is any "worse" than middle class culture
- ✓ It also begins to lay some of the blame for inequality with the schools, arguing that they are not responsive to a wide range cultural of backgrounds – i.e. they are too middle class
- ✗ There is a lack of empirical support (evidence) for the theory.
- ✗ Marxism tends to be a bit "conspiratorial" – do you really believe that ruling elite secretly conspires to keep working class children from achieving?
- ✗ The theory fails to explain why some middle-class students fail whilst other working-class students succeed.
- ✗ **Aggleton (1987)** argues that there can be conflict between middle class culture and school culture, explaining how some middle-class students with cultural capital resist schooling in ways similar to working-class students and end up with no formal qualifications. Aggleton argues that these students are socialised into a culture of personal fulfilment and creativity, which conflicts with the regimentation and formality of school life. However, the cultural capital of these students still advantages them in later life, as it means that they will not be impaired in the same way as working-class children when they come to get a job.

Out-Of-School Factors: Evaluation

- ✓ They are an improvement on genetic explanations as they show how social factors have an influence on attainment.
- ✓ They show how the resources that children bring to the school help or hinder their attainment.
- ✗ They largely place all of the blame for differential educational achievement outside of the education system. Surely schools have some impact on the attainment of students?
- ✗ They are **deterministic**, assuming that working-class culture will inevitably be passed on and that students from less affluent backgrounds will inevitably fail. They consequently fail to explain why some working class students succeed whilst other middle class students fail.
- ✗ They assume that working class culture is **homogenous** – there may be as much difference between two working-class children as between them and a middle-class child.



To help you remember which theorists and studies fits in which areas, spend some time now creating a mind map-type representation of the topic so far (leave space for another two branches). Concentrate on key theorists and evaluation.