

Giddens, Bourdieu, and Inequality: Educational Attainment, Work Ethic, and Career Choice

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Foreword

- Set out to investigate background behind occupation/career/life choices
- Big part of my campus life/pre-college
- Work to explore value of blue collar work
- Explore topics of less “glamorous” work in our changing economy
- Explore topics of:
 - Educational attainment
 - Inequality
 - Social and cultural capital
 - My own experiences

- Family emphasized learning but had a rocky experience with school
- Individual passion was the focus, but access to resources was difficult
- Coming from a working class family made things complicated
- For the rest of my family, life gets in the way of school
- One can have the drive, skill, willpower to study, but it isn't always possible, and had to set aside opportunities to study
- Many of my other family members had similar stories; strong talents could not be used because of financial constraints

Rationale

- When one enters the workforce without post-secondary credentials, it's often into the occupations that hold America together: ones often eschewed when we think about "good" jobs
- These jobs kept my family afloat for generations; they're not something to look down upon & college-education isn't a universal path
- Steady, in-demand and plentiful, but seen as unglamorous
- But why are they unglamorous?
- My family has instilled the value of hard work and necessity of jobs like what I do
- But what determines how people make these life path decisions?

College options

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- Studies of working class youth's education & them as a whole provide insight
- Salvation or Safety Net? By Silva and Snellman examines dilemmas/challenges of FGLI/working class youth & families
- They purport to often view college in view as salvation from low-paying careers (like my family's) & economic predicaments
- Tough reality when faced with graduation rate, enrollment disparity between class
- On the other side, a more middle class "safety net" where parents worry of future downward mobility (Why are those jobs the problem?)
- "Working-class and middle-class families make choices about college through particular lenses that carrier their own costs and benefits, and justify different kinds of trade-offs and sacrifices." (Silva and Snellman 2018:578)

Bourdieu's Capital

- To understand narrative lenses, one must understand social/cultural capital
- Bourdieu articulates these in *The Forms of Capital* (1986)
- Capital is generally embodied economic/social power in variety of forms, most important being economic/social capital
- 3 varieties of cultural capital: embodied, objectified, institutionalized
- Embodied: dispositions of the mind/body
- Objectified: cultural goods
- Institutionalized: credentials and degrees (institutionalized mechanisms)
- Social capital: Conferred by one's access to networks/social relationships (like institutionalized social capital)
- Can ultimately derive from economic capital but distinct in many ways

Institutions

- Meanwhile, Bedelia Richards argues institutions (like conceptualized by Bourdieu) transmit embodied cultural capital, create help-seeking dispositions, cultivate specialized knowledge, to improve student outcomes (Richards 2022:241, 253-254)
- Richards challenges notion that schools function merely as agents of social reproduction, instead arguing status can be altered through transmission of cultural capital (Richards 2022:242)
- Uses conceptualization of some students as “privileged poor who attend prep/boarding schools & gain cultural capital which can allow success in elite colleges/universities
- Purports school staff serve as essential parent surrogates for purpose of transmitting cultural capital

- Schools varied by amount of capital they can transmit by location/income/resources
- Less resourced schools, like the ones that many of my family attended can only transmit so much/change behavior of so many students
- Limit to what behaviors they can implement/influence in embodied cultural capital
- Elite prep schools undoubtedly can offer more
- FGLI like myself undoubtedly carry less social/cultural capital
- Family carries less social/cultural capital, like many first-gen college students
- Without institutional/procedural knowledge, harder to progress through college/into workforce

Inequality & Structuration

- How might this navigational inequality be addressed?
- Anthony Giddens in *Elements of the Theory of Structuration* theorizes that reflexivity ('monitored character of social life') composes *structuration* of social life one must function within, defined by 'rationalization of action', where one's behavior is evaluated by others (Giddens 1984:4)
- He means that our social character/behavior is defined by rules (knowledge of cultural capital), granting us advantages in the world (social capital)
- Giddens asserts intentional actions are monitored for social/physical contexts in which actions are performed (1984:5)
- Can form basis of biases, social reproduction within institutions, social inequities & inequalities
- Actions with unintended consequences often have element of power & "to be an agent is to be able to deploy [...] a range of causal powers" (Giddens 1984:14)

Dialectic of Control

- Within school system & career system, cultural capital can be used to acquire social capital, but how?
- By means of structures of rationalization, those in working class not always able to apply such behaviors because they aren't always known
- Giddens summarizes with set of rules, prefaced with implication they're for social reproduction, and "the sanctioning of modes of social conduct" (1984:17-18)
- Social life has rules known to various degrees by various actors with various levels of power, this is cultural capital
- People engage in these social systems with various levels of competency, levels of judgment, access, leading to different outcomes
- Distribution of resources unequally: dialectic of control (1984:15-16)

Dynamics

- Inequities arising from power dynamics run deeper through institutions such as schools; without cultural capital to help- seek, self-advocate, navigate institutional barriers: harder to find path to success
 - Places FGLI & other marginalized students at a disadvantage, oftentimes entire schools
 - Students & schools that serve these disadvantage students must be set up for success & must transmit cultural and social capital as well as they can, or risk failing students
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Social and Cultural Influences

- Within the realm of social/cultural influences, schooling most major influence on career goals/choices
- In high school, wide variety of options presented to us
- Colleges presented, career fairs, military recruiting, but no specific direction
- While some headed directly to the workforce, others headed to the higher ed route
- Different sects seemed to emerge, almost like it was pre-determined and crossing the boundary was rare
- When I expressed that I wanted to go to college/apply through QuestBridge, my guidance counselor didn't seem to be very encouraging or believe in me
- Even though I did well & was in the "college-bound" part of my school, I don't think she believed in me

Grinnell Background

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- At Grinnell, things are very different: backgrounds, environment, what jobs people do, want, and have.
- Variety of tiers of jobs, and some surprised I'm "loyal" to my current job
- Many starting jobs very different, tutoring over retail, internships & research
- Very different value system, valuing white collar over other types of work
- Many believe status as college student is by individual merit, not systematic of family educational attainment & generational wealth + resource accumulation
- Going to college reinforced my desire to learn, but put into perspective how taken for granted the opportunity is for many

Careerism

- For many, career choice is obvious: like their school, elite
- Majority of students at elite schools funnelled into most lucrative careers (finance, consulting, tech)
- Explicitly engage in “cultural matching” to hire students (Binder et al. 2016:22), something that works us back to social/cultural capital
- Careerism is rampant, but so is cleft habitus: mismatch between upbringing & environment leading to differing goals/desires in FGLI students
- Many believe these high-demand fields are harmful and not valuable, want to produce social good instead
- Priorities of respondents claimed work-life balance & working with passions, but particularly FGLI (Kim 2026:119)

Structuralism in career

- Companies also form institutions like Giddens refers to, which reward social/cultural capital & perpetuate inequality
- Unintended consequence of the order of social systems (Giddens 1984:16-17)
- Institutions, informed by structural principles, inadvertently reproduce societal-level biases fed into by other elite institutions informed by structuration
- Reflexivity of one's behavior informed by social rules & cultural capital informed by inequality and social structuring

Questions?

References

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