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**EVALUATING THE CONTINUED RELEVANCE OF PIERRE  
BOURDIEU'S CONCEPT OF 'CULTURAL CAPITAL' IN THE  
ANALYSIS OF CLASS INEQUALITIES WITHIN THE UK HIGHER  
EDUCATION SYSTEM**

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## Abstract

Class inequalities within the contemporary higher education system have been at the focus of governments across the world over recent years. Mainstream literature presents the importance of considering this topic in order to improve social mobility and reflect the need for a highly educated workforce within a competitive global economy. Looking specifically at the United Kingdom (UK), this literature review considers the work of Pierre Bourdieu and his cultural reproduction theory; and specifically how the concept of cultural capital contributes to a deeper understanding of persistent class barriers that prevent access to higher education. The first section outlines the key principles of neoliberalism to contextualise the contemporary higher education system from a social justice and equity perspective. This section also discusses the methodology of the literature review and how it was conducted; and highlights the importance of employing a reflexive approach to social analysis that Bourdieu himself adopts. Chapter two then outlines the key literature which explores the concept of cultural capital and is structured according to its perceived relevance: significant, insignificant and limited; and addresses emerging themes from the literature. Finally, chapter three discusses the findings of the literature review and concludes that cultural capital as a concept is still of significant relevance to the analysis of class inequalities in the field of education when considered alongside structural factors such as assumption of dominant culture, engagement strategies and pedagogic communication; and within the wider architecture of Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory. By adopting Bourdieu's rigorous approach to analysis, this research also concludes the concept of cultural capital should be continuously revisited and empirically evaluated to ensure its continued relevance in an increasingly marketized environment of the institutional hierarchy. Given the neoliberal context within which the higher education system operates in the UK, these findings are able to contribute to a comprehensive evidence base on public policy approaches to tackling class inequalities in the UK higher education system.

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Finally, I would also like to thank the University of Glasgow for allowing me to do this research. This research topic is something I am very interested in and have been excited to work throughout my MSc course. Thank you for allowing me to pursue this.

I wanted to conduct my dissertation on this particular topic as being a working class young woman from the North East of Glasgow, class issues have played an important role in my upbringing. As a student at the university of Glasgow, I believe education has the power to challenge the class inequalities that persist within wider society and plays a key role in the achievement of social justice. Nevertheless, this MSc course has encouraged me to think critically about policy discourse and how society today is shaped by norms, particularly surrounding class. Despite any strong interest, I have entered this study with an open mind and look forward to the results which come out of it.

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**Class Inequalities in Higher Education: A Neoliberal Context**

Over recent years, governments throughout the United Kingdom (UK) have prioritised tackling inequalities to allow for equal life chances across the country, particularly in terms of educational opportunities. National higher education policy has been created with a vision to improve access for those from low socioeconomic backgrounds into university by minimising or removing the persistent barriers that have historically prevented them doing so (Gallacher, 2006). Sosu and Ellis (2014) argue those from disadvantaged backgrounds should be given maximum political and policy attention in order to understand the poverty-related factors that negatively impact opportunities to access higher education; and will therefore be the underpinning rationale of this research (2014: 43). Hence, as equality in higher education is a persistently relevant topic in public policy discussion, it is important to continuously consider established theories within the field to gain a better understanding of the barriers which prevent access to university; and apply a rigorous analytical framework to the discussion of potential solutions.

Neoliberal values are key drivers of current higher education policy, such as: increased tuition fees for students; common understanding that universities aid economic growth; and the need to be transparent and accountable to ‘consumers’ to ensure ‘value for money’ (CEC, 2006). Osborne (2003) argues inequalities within higher education result from “the economic imperatives created by global competition; and the challenge of the knowledge economy and individual responsibility” (2003: 7). Importantly, these inequalities, which are manufactured as a result of neoliberalism, are a primary factor as to why higher education is deeply inaccessible to those who suffer from its consequences; and is therefore a key aspect of this research’s analysis. Mainstream literature outlines a loss of three things brought about by neoliberalism: economic and social justice; democracy; and critical thought (Hill and Kumar, 2009). In the UK, this is demonstrated in policies such as a cap on wages and austerity measures which have led to an increase in people entering unstable financial situations, consequently impacting upon their social position and academic choices (Bourdieu, 1986: 724). Hence, neoliberalism has had a significant impact on students who attend, or wish to

attend, these institutions; particularly in terms of the struggle for upward social mobility that education has the power to facilitate (Reay et al., 2009).

Hence the persistent class inequalities within the UK higher education sector for students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds has become an increasingly prominent issue as neoliberalism has led to an increase in poverty through economic maldistribution (Brown, 2006: 694). Understanding the instrumental factors pushing class inequalities within higher education contextualises the arguments of this research; and highlights the importance of considering the issue to promote upward social mobility for individuals and reflect the need for a highly-educated workforce within a globally competitive economy. Class inequalities within higher education can therefore be considered in two regards: economic factors and cultural factors; both of which can present as barriers that discourage students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds from entering university. These barriers can therefore be understood through education's contribution to social justice and continuity, and is the lens through which this research will consider the relevance of Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital in the contemporary higher education system.

### **Concepts as 'Thinking Tools' within Pierre Bourdieu's Theory**

Pierre Bourdieu has acquired a prominent place in sociology. The concept of 'capital' is central to Bourdieu's theory, as is the various forms this has; and suggests that in order to gain products and power, one must possess some form of capital. 'Capital' is often used to explain how class inequalities are produced and reproduced, and so it is essential to understand this concept when exploring Bourdieu's theory. Historically, 'capital' has been referred to within economic analyses of class, such as the work of Karl Marx, and focussed on the macro-level economic circumstances that influence class positioning within society (Savage and Bennett, 2005). However, Bourdieu's class analysis aims to consider additional variables other than economic circumstances to include forms such as social and cultural capital, and the methods through which they interlink, thereby moving away from the linear class analysis that has previously dominated discourse (2005: 32). Bourdieu's theory therefore aims to combine structure and agency to create a framework that investigates how this intersection impacts upon life opportunities, educational equity and social class position. Hence, 'capital' within Bourdieu's theory focusses on a process of accumulation and conversion; and so social classes are defined by those who have the greatest amount in

common in the greatest possible respects in terms of capital (Bourdieu. 1986; Savage et al., 2005: 33).

As well as the cultural element of his framework, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) also recognise the importance of economic circumstances within a capitalist society, and this is an important aspect of his theory to consider when researching a market-driven higher education system against a neoliberal backdrop. He does, however, put economic circumstances in a different context to other dominant class theorists such as Karl Marx; and he does not reduce class to economic relations or position in the labour market (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 65). Instead, Bourdieu argues for the differentiation of social relations into a series of discrete ‘fields’, each with their own ‘stakes’ around which individuals struggle for position with that structured arena. A ‘field’ is described as “a configuration of relations between positions objectively defined in the determination they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 72-73). According to Bourdieu, culture is the mediating factor of structure and agency and so is both a product and process within a field. In the field of education, academic products structure practice according to cultural capital and so it is essential the concept is investigated within that context.

### *Cultural Capital, Field and Power*

Cultural capital in particular is a prominent concept when analysing class inequalities within the field of education through individuals’ actions; as opposed to the solely macro-level economic circumstances which categorise social groups based on people who own property, and those who do not (Savage et al., 2005: 32). The concept of cultural capital originates in Bourdieu’s cultural reproduction theory where he argued that individuals’ and families’ cultural resources comprise a distinct form of capital which should be regarded on equal terms as economic resources and social networks. Although Bourdieu’s definition of cultural capital is rather vague, it pertains to knowledge of the dominant normative codes inscribed in a culture (Lamont and Lareau, 1988). For Bourdieu, it is culture that transcends the dichotomy of structure and agency by conceptualising human action into a single movement that connects culture to power (Swartz, 2012: 7). Cultural capital takes three forms: institutionalised, objectified and embodied (Bourdieu, 1982). Institutionalised cultural capital refers to when an institution, such as a university, recognises an individual’s cultural capital and is usually in the form of educational degrees and qualifications. Objectified cultural



capital refers to a person's property and cultural goods that have a unique meaning in a culture, such as paintings and books, for example. Finally, embodied cultural capital refers to the incorporation of cultural attitudes and practices within an individual, as those who possess cultural capital can secure advantages such as additional tuition for their children and extracurricular activities to demonstrate 'accomplishments'. Embodied cultural capital consists of our perceptions, knowledge and abilities. According to Harker (1990), cultural capital is inherited over time, often through the socialisation process and through the family; and although cultural capital acts alongside social and economic capital, these are often intercepted as 'clean breaks do not exist' (1990: 110). Bourdieu does however highlight that capital is field specific and does not always translate into other fields (1990: 114). Nevertheless, while the concept of 'cultural capital' is historically well-used within mainstream literature of how class inequalities are manifested within the field of education, it is important to revisit this concept to evaluate its effectiveness in explaining contemporary class inequalities within higher education to ensure its continued relevance in the field.

As an anthropologist, Bourdieu was interested in the ways in which structure and agency intersect to determine life opportunities through the lens of culture and relational sociology; and in particular how these aspects impact the organisation of social classes within fields to legitimise power and domination. His work therefore looks at how culture positions individuals within hierarchical social groups and how these groups struggle over valued resources to pursue their interests within set fields (Swartz, 2012: 9). Specifically, Bourdieu focusses on how this intersection and method of organising social classes influences the way in which class is structured within the field of education. Perceiving culture as the mediating factor gives recognition to the relative autonomy of cultural behaviour and its constructive role in the formation of social classes; and how this leads to stratification of power. For Bourdieu, culture is the 'hidden dimension of power relations' which he aims to bring to the forefront of sociological analysis; as by doing so he believes the existing stratified social structure can be destroyed, leaving room for alternative social arrangements in its place (Swartz, 2012: 10). Therefore, culture does not focus on the relationship of exploitation, but on the accumulation of capital and how this can be passed down through social structures such as the family and social networks, and subsequently converted in certain fields. Hence, while Bourdieu recognises that the economic cannot be isolated from other determinants, he does not marginalise questions of culture and social interactions as these are key factors in class stratification. However, fields do change over time and so it is necessary to revisit the

concepts and analyses that are employed to explain relations within that field. Grenfell and James (2004) argue Bourdieu's 'thinking tools' enables a focus on culture and relations as well as structural elements through adopting a reflexive framework. As such, Bourdieu's work has not been substantially altered since its inception, but needs to be reviewed and refocussed depending on the field, and so will be a primary objective of this research (Swartz, 2012: 16).

### *Cultural Capital and Habitus*

Furthermore, Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' is also related to cultural capital. Although Bourdieu acknowledges culture is arbitrary, the meanings attached to those cultures mark the distinction between groups within the social hierarchy; and it is that social distance that valorise symbolic relationships in the field of culture (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 5). 'Habitus' is a set of dispositions that influence the way in which an individual speaks, thinks and acts. For Bourdieu, this is inherently linked to a person's social position and embodied cultural capital, such as their class background; and can be described as the internalised method in which an individual makes decisions based on their particular set of circumstances (Bourdieu, 1989: 19). As discussed, the concept of cultural capital is one of Bourdieu's major contributions to the critical analysis of education processes and the ways in which they are associated with socially unequal outcomes. Moore (2004) conducted a study to locate the concept of 'cultural capital' within Bourdieu's wider theory; and maps out how the concepts 'cultural capital' and 'habitus' interact with one another to create a comprehensive framework to analyse how social inequality is produced and reproduced within education. Moore (2004) insists cultural capital has value as it is habitus in an embodied form such as speech and demeanour that privilege individuals in the politics of everyday life. It is through culture that pedagogic communication can maintain the relationship between education and the dominant group in order to guarantee that group's dominant position within education, and in turn, wider society (Moore, 2004: 451).

A plethora of literature focusses on persistent barriers and class inequalities which prevent those from low socioeconomic backgrounds accessing higher education (Reay et al., 2009). These barriers can be analysed both in a theoretical perspective and empirically. Bourdieu's framework can help understand the decision-making process through which students decide to pursue higher education and outlines how important culture and capital are in navigating

this process; as since class is reproduced through the family, those with access to finance and social networks are able to lay the foundations which allow for better life opportunities than those who do not (Lareau, 2011: 363). Power (2012) argues higher education policy should be assessed through the lens of the injustices they try to remedy. While this research focusses on the UK higher education system as a whole, there will be some recognition to the various approaches in the devolved nations which creates a space for comparative analysis; and will be applied when appropriate.

Therefore, this research focusses on the class inequalities within the UK higher education system that mean individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to consider university as a viable pathway and have significantly different experiences of the higher education system compared to their middle-class peers (Reay et al., 2009). Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital has been employed in previous research to explain these inequalities and how higher education can reinforce social stratification which prevent those at the bottom of the hierarchy from entering university. This research will therefore be underpinned by a social class discourse. Class inequalities as a result of neoliberalism have been encroaching on the higher education system for decades, and evidence of this can still be seen today. Hence, while Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory and concept of cultural capital has acquired a prominent place within the sociology of education, it is important to frequently evaluate the relevance of its application and its usefulness of deepening understanding of class inequalities within contemporary higher education to justify its continued use.

### **Research Question, Aims and Objectives**

***Research question: To what extent is cultural capital a relevant conceptual tool to understanding educational equity?***

In order to explore the overarching question, the research will adopt the following aims and objectives:

1. To critically consider existing literature on Pierre Bourdieu's analysis as an explanatory tool of the UK higher education system.

2. To evaluate the continued relevance of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital' in relation to other mediating factors and in a variety of contexts.
3. To provide the foundations for future research into the concept of 'cultural capital' and its application in education research.

## **Methodology and Process**

Torgerson (2003) emphasises the importance of researchers outlining the process by which the literature review was carried out, including the method behind how some literature was chosen and some was omitted from the appraisal. She argues "if the search strategy and inclusion criteria have not been made explicit, it will not be possible for the review to be replicated by a third party" (2003: 5). Furthermore, Tight (2019) argues the ability for others to follow and partially replicate the review is crucial to an evaluation's worth, and so this section will discuss the methods that were used to select the included literature, and why there is more focus on some aspects than others.

Keyword searches were made in the University of Glasgow library catalogue and online databases including Google Scholar and International ERIC. The main foci were: 'Pierre Bourdieu', 'cultural capital', 'United Kingdom', 'UK higher education' and 'class inequalities'. Hence, database searches incorporated words and phrases such as 'higher education', 'university', 'inequalities', 'students' and 'working class students'. These terms were used to narrow the scope of the research. 'Grey literature' such as newspaper articles, articles of reflection and reports produced outside conventional publication channels were omitted (Macfarlane et al., 2012: 9). Even with these omissions, the online database produced hundreds of results, only a minority of which was of quality relevance to this review. Thirteen key articles were then selected and grouped according to their arguments in relation to how useful and significant Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is to understanding contemporary class inequalities within the UK's higher education system. While some articles advocated for cultural capital's ongoing relevance in class analysis, others argued other mediating factors were of more importance; and others highlighted it was a useful concept to some extent within particular fields and contexts.

### *Bias and Reflexivity*

An important factor in the validity of research is potential bias from the researcher. Hart (1998) recognises the literature chosen for a review, and the way in which it is presented and discussed, may favour a ‘particular standpoint’ (1998: 13). Hence, while research is not purposely biased, there is a level of subjectivity that is inevitable which allows researchers to emphasise the literature that supports their point of view, simultaneously omitting the literature that does not. Moreover, this review does not attempt to cover all literature on Bourdieu or ‘cultural capital’, but the key arguments in its application to educational inequalities, with a particular focus on higher education in the UK. Hence, readers should remain critical of the findings and consider this literature review as part of a comprehensive evidence-base of higher education policy.

Importantly, Bourdieu’s cultural reproduction theory has much in common with these modern conceptions of positionality, advocating that bias is taken seriously on the part of the researcher. Bourdieu rejects scientific positivism and its ideal of value-neutral objectivity, as the practice of social science itself is not exempt from the process of social differentiation. Bourdieu argues researchers are not exempt from underlying interests and so research requires a “rigorous self-critical practice of social science” which he terms ‘reflexivity’ (Swartz, 2012: 17). Bourdieu applies this level of critical inquiry to his own work and suggests other social scientists do the same when carrying out their observations. This does not mean Bourdieu rejects all forms of scientific objectivity in favour of a thoroughly interpretive and realist approach to understanding the social world; but he does emphasise it is only through a reflective practice of social enquiry that one can achieve a degree of objectivity in the social world (Swartz, 2012: 18). Bourdieu sees reflexivity as “a necessary prerequisite of any rigorous social practice” which frees the researcher from constraints (Bourdieu, 1989: 19). It is this approach which distinguishes Bourdieu’s framework to others within sociology and has characterised his work from its inception. This approach enriches and increases the complexity of his thought as he investigates both the role of culture in social class reproduction and the epistemological conditions that make it possible to study culture reflexively and objectively; and represents a unique contribution to social theory and critical research. Hence, this research will be working in the spirit of Bourdieu to forensically examine the application of the concept of cultural capital within his theory to class inequalities to ensure a rigorous framework continues to be applied within the contemporary

higher education system.

The following chapter will present a range of literature relating to the research question in order to form an analytical base. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital' and its relation to social inequalities will be discussed in depth; and will consider a variety of analytical and empirical points. In 2017, Bourdieu was the second most cited sociologist in British sociology journals by official measures (Ranking Web of Universities, 2020). Sociologists have been discussing his work since its inception in the early 1970s when his concept of cultural capital was first developed as a means of understanding how culture mediates between structure and agency to impact the relationship between educational inequality and social class. The significance of this discussion cannot be overstated as it is important to frequently evaluate concepts in order to justify their use. This section will therefore look at how 'cultural capital' has been applied to class issues within higher education in mainstream literature in order to provide the foundation for evaluation. Using Bourdieu's 'thinking tools' outlined in chapter one, the concept of cultural capital will be discussed, as well as its relationship to other concepts within Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory to create a framework for class analysis. The literature outlined three ways in which cultural capital is perceived in relation to its relevance: significant, insignificant and limited; and this is how each section will be structured in this chapter. Sub-sections will also be structured according to the emerging themes of the literature.

### **Cultural Capital as a Significant Concept**

This section will outline the supporting literature for Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. It will discuss the location of 'cultural capital' within Bourdieu's wider cultural reproduction theory and will apply this empirically to the UK's contemporary higher education system. The literature within this section highlights how cultural capital is a relevant concept to understanding class inequalities through misrepresentation and symbolic violence of working-class students; and the importance of adapting institutional culture to support working-class students. These were key factors that emerged from higher education literature and so this section will be structured according to these themes; and will discuss how cultural capital is a useful explanatory tool for discussing contemporary educational inequity within Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory.

### *Misrepresentation, Symbolic Violence and Widening Participation*

Cultural capital has found favour particularly in the underrepresentation of working-class students in UK universities; and so has been a central focus to research concerning higher education as “the educational norms of dominant social classes are the ones that prevail and work to exclude minority classes from participating in higher education” (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). While various theories have been employed to explain the persistent underrepresentation of working-class students, Bourdieu’s framework has been applied to investigate the cultural disparity that prevents access for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, despite national efforts to encourage participation (Cliona et al., 2017: 1221). Bourdieu terms this ‘symbolic violence’ and the concept of cultural capital provides the lens through which this can be explored, looking specifically at how cultural capital is inequitably distributed among social classes. This is important when looking at how inequalities are manifested in institutional environments as research has shown when students lack access to forms of cultural capital that are valued by the dominant social classes, their educational outcomes are limited (Reay et al., 2009). According to Bourdieu, middle-class students are able to navigate the education system by using their skills and knowledge obtained from previous exposure to the dominant culture that persists within institutions, inevitably putting working-class students at an immediate disadvantage due to their lack of cultural capital (1986: 119). Hence, power relations, relational sociology and the associated system of class relationships provide the key to understanding the cultural field, and vice versa (Moore, 2004: 446). However, although correlated, Bourdieu’s model is not reductive in that the cultural does not always reflect the economic as like in Marxist thought; but occupies an autonomous space within wider cultural reproduction theory. While the concept of cultural capital may be regarded in a separate domain, the power this represents is at the heart of all social life and has the power to facilitate upward social mobility (Swartz, 2012: 6). Nevertheless, cultural capital is an underpinning factor of social stratification and can affect whether an individual decides to enter higher education. Because working-class students tend to have lower cultural capital than their middle-class peers, they are less likely to consider university as a viable option, which in turn contributes to misrepresentation and symbolic violence (Moore, 2004). Hence, Bourdieu’s cultural reproduction theory illuminates the way in which power is legitimised and exposes social classes to certain probabilities depending on their ability to navigate the dominant culture through cultural capital possession (Bourdieu,



1986: 47). Therefore, this location of culture within Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory highlights how structure and agency intersect to underpin the stratified class system through persistent misrepresentation of working-class students; and demonstrates the significance of the concept to the analysis of contemporary class inequalities within higher education.

Looking at this application of cultural capital empirically, it is important to note that higher education is no exception to the trend of commodification brought about by neoliberalism which causes education to be "marked by selection, exclusion and the rampant growth of inequalities" (Hill and Kumar, 2009: 1). Johnson et al. (2011) explores Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1992) argument that an individual will feel out of place in a particular setting if their habitus does not match that of the institution, leading to that group's underrepresentation (1992: 127). Johnson et al. (2011) terms this 'social identity threat' which provides a framework for understanding the circumstances under which a stigmatised social identity becomes psychologically limiting (2011: 840). Adhering to Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory, a series of cognitive processes are triggered when their identity is underrepresented within that environment – such as feeling anxious and 'out of place' – which then results in a series of tasks being compromised (Murphy et al., 2007). This demonstrates the central premise of Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory of how culture exposes individuals to certain probabilities and practices depending on their possession of cultural capital as underrepresentation can lead to self-devaluation and anxiety of what university "has in store for the dominated class" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1997: 204).

As such, Moore (2004) emphasises the importance of embodied cultural capital in determining class position and educational opportunities. The habitus of an individual and the habitus of an institution do not always match due to the individual's lack of previous exposure to the culture that dominates in that environment. In the context of university, this has a detrimental effect on working-class students and has the power to influence their sense of belonging there, often leading to the misrepresentation of working-class students in universities across the UK (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127). Cultural capital therefore reinforces social inequalities by valuing the cultural capital of the dominant class over those from lower socioeconomic groups. Hence, Moore (2004) highlights cultural capital is valuable to understanding how social class is reproduced within and through education; particularly in its embodied form such as speech and demeanour that privilege individuals in the politics of everyday life and can determine educational opportunities (2004: 450). Moore

(2004) acknowledges culture on its own is arbitrary, but the attached meanings to culture legitimises power and stratification; and so the lack of exposure to dominant cultures can impact a person's sense of belonging in that environment, thereby reinforcing inequality of educational opportunities and symbolic violence. Therefore, cultural capital is a significant and relevant concept in the field of education as it can be used to explain inequality of opportunities and how working-class students are persistently misrepresented within the higher education sector.

Moreover, the principles of how cultural capital can explain the misrepresentation of working-class students in higher education can be employed to the discussion of potential solutions, and has formed the basis of widening participation efforts. Cliona et al. (2017) looked at how widening participation programmes can help students develop cultural capital to facilitate a smooth transition into the dominant culture and avoid negative consequences. Research has identified several barriers to the educational progression of low socioeconomic students, including underperformance at school level, long-term educational disengagement, structure of the admissions process and effects of the family environment (Keane, 2015; Smyth et al., 2015). Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are often bounded by the limitations imparted by their level of capital; which means that even students who qualify for entry into higher education may adapt their preferences based on their environment, so they do not consider particular institutions as within their reach (Watts, 2012). However, Cliona et al. (2017) insist widening participation programmes are helpful for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to develop the capabilities identified as important to navigate higher education; and will help to alleviate the effects of Johnson et al.'s (2011) social identity threat by facilitating a smooth transition into the university and its culture (2017: 1240). Through considering the development of widening participation programmes through the lens of cultural disparities, cultural capital is demonstrated as a significant concept not only in explaining class inequalities in higher education, but in the exploration of potential solutions to allow for greater parity in educational opportunities across social classes.

### *Institutional Culture Beyond Widening Participation*

The importance of adapting university culture beyond widening participation efforts is a common theme in higher education literature. Widening participation programmes have been found as a significant platform to explore Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital within higher

education research; but while these programmes provide an opportunity for working-class students to progress in higher education through accumulating cultural capital, the deficit discourses can place the responsibility on the individual, consequently neglecting the role of the structures within the institution that reproduce social inequalities. As such, Reay et al. (2009) argue it is equally important for action beyond the rhetoric of widening access to ensure education does not produce social inequalities through the deficit of adequate cultural capital. This underpins Leese's (2010) observation that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds navigate "two social worlds" as they tend to spend less time on campus due to domestic commitments; and have less cultural capital than their middle-class counterparts (2010: 244). Using Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory, the principles of developing cultural capital within widening participation programmes provokes discussion on what ways the learning environment can be improved to meet the needs of socially disadvantaged students even after admission and widening participation efforts, but without encouraging too much dependency (Haggis, 2006). Without the recognition of the importance of cultural capital throughout higher education institutions, widening participation programmes are at risk of becoming mundane, 'tick box' exercises used simply to meet a quota, leaving academic staff ill equipped to support working-class students and rendering higher education as a field of continuous social reproduction (Leese, 2010).

Therefore, class inequalities are manifested in higher education institutions as possession of cultural capital is often assumed in order to thrive in this environment. Looking at this issue empirically, Leese (2010) considers the importance of embodied cultural capital after university admission among widening participation students; and how the massification and marketisation of higher education provision has resulted in less attention being paid to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Using Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory, Leese's (2010) study focussed on the early experiences in the initial six weeks of the course, which she termed the 'transition period' (2010: 241). The university in which this study took place was committed to developing their widening participation programmes and so was an appropriate setting to evaluate the continued relevance of 'cultural capital' empirically in terms of opportunities to develop and adapt to dominant culture; but also how the structures of the institution can be adapted to support working-class students (2010: 242). Institutions are inherently biased in favour of certain social groups and normalise the middle-class experience of higher education. For example, working-class participants expressed concern about not having the appropriate linguistic skills needed to succeed at university; but this was

within the language of the institution itself – including enrolment process and timetable setting – rather than the subject-specific language within lectures (2010: 246). This demonstrates the ways in which possession of the dominant culture is often assumed within institutions and so students who lack previous exposure to this culture are disadvantaged from the outset. In particular, cultural capital in its embodied form underpins social stratification within the field of education and can explain how class inequalities are reproduced through individual agency. Hence, while the transition process into university should start with an appropriate and stimulating induction, widening participation programmes must be accompanied with a change of institutional environment and culture; and efforts to help students develop cultural capital should be a thorough and engaging long-term process to ensure students who lack cultural capital are supported to ‘fit in’ (Reay, 2016: 20). Failure to do so could lead to self-exclusion from higher education, resulting in the continued reproduction of cultural capital inequity within institutions (Leese, 2010: 247). Hence, Bourdieu’s cultural reproduction theory in the analysis of widening participation programmes and wider institutional structures illuminates the ways in which cultural capital is assumed within institutions, and provides a useful lens through which class inequalities within the UK’s higher education system can be investigated.

Furthermore, the importance of adapting institutional cultures to support working-class students can be exemplified in students’ engagement strategies with university staff. Professional support networks consisting of university staff and authority figures can assist integration into university culture and can also have lasting benefits in terms of academic development and student wellbeing. Further, students who form professional networks are most likely to receive positive recommendations from their professors and additional support in their assignments, which further enhances educational success (Jack, 2016). However, a class disparity exists between students who are able to form these networks and those who are not, which Jack (2016) applies Bourdieu’s cultural reproduction theory to explore. Through the use of individual interviews and qualitative analysis, he found that middle-class students are able to draw upon their cultural capital to confidently engage with authority figures and are more likely to experience positive interactions with professors and teaching staff (Jack, 2016: 3). Through this, middle-class students can reap the benefits of having a professional support network and can reinforce their dominant position within the field of education (2016: 5). On the other hand, working-class students experience more disruptive experiences in university than their middle-class peers due to their lack of ability to adapt to

institutional culture, and thus are far less likely to engage with teaching staff to form a beneficial support network. In Jack's (2016) study, most working-class students reported fewer interactions with authority figures, consequently impacting upon long-term academic development and confidence within the university. Although not all working-class students reported a 'negative' interaction with authority figures, only one third reported a positive effect; and most did not consider this as an important aspect of university (2016: 15). Hence, this demonstrates how working-class students are at a distinct disadvantage due to their lack of cultural capital and how "universities too narrowly focus on middle class norms as the culturally appropriate way to be a university student", thereby alienating working-class students (Fryberg et al., 2012: 1180).

Therefore, using Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory, scholars argue that class-based engagement strategies lead to greater inequality in academic settings; thereby demonstrating that proactive engagement with authority figures is a useful lens through which cultural capital can be analysed within the field of education (Lareau, 2003). Jack (2016) concludes that "investment in diversity must expand from access to inclusion" in that it is not enough to simply encourage more working-class people into university, but one must use a culturalist approach to interrogate institutionalised norms that shape university experiences; and actively work to adapt these practices to support working-class students even after university admission (2016: 15). While widening participation programmes are a vital element of this process to allow the accumulation of cultural capital, this should be a long-term process with continuous opportunities for students to become accustomed to the dominant culture in higher education; and to avoid threat to their academic identities and withdrawal from campus life (2016: 2). Such affirmation helps students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to feel like they share similar goals with the university and will have positive impacts on their ability to engage with university staff and wider academic development. Importantly, this must also be considered at an institutional level as class stratification does not result from any one individual, but rather from systemic structural inequalities that exist in wider society and are often reproduced in higher education. While working-class students regard staff members as *facilitators* in academic success, middle-class students consider them as *partners*; and this disparity in proactive outreach can lead to an inequitable distribution of resources, demonstrating how class inequalities can be reproduced within higher education institutions. Middle-class students are able to navigate institutional structures by utilising their familiarity with the dominant culture in a way that working-class students are not, thereby highlighting

the relevance of cultural capital as an analytical tool.

### **Cultural Concept as an Insignificant Concept**

Other studies have found cultural capital to be a less important variable in the exploration of class inequalities in the field of education. This section will focus on the literature that argues cultural capital is not a useful concept in exploring contemporary class inequalities within higher education. It will discuss two key themes: marketisation and context, in order to explore other mediating factors that assist in the creation of educational inequity. Again, these were key topics that emerged from the literature on higher education and are the themes upon which this section will be structured. The research question will be discussed in relation to other mediating factors which are arguably more significant in explaining contemporary class inequalities within the UK's higher education system. These topics therefore assist in the evaluation of the continued relevance of cultural capital as a concept within Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory.

#### *Marketisation*

Cultural capital has significant competition as an explanatory variable in the shape of marketisation. Class inequalities in higher education can be explored through the analysis of the institutional hierarchy in the UK; and the methods through which working-class people are most likely to attend 'low status and poorly resourced institutions' (Crozier et al., 2008). The institutional hierarchy in the UK consists of Oxford and Cambridge at the point; Russell Group universities which are a membership organisation of large research-intensive institutions; other pre-1992 universities; and post-1992 universities, many of which have a polytechnic and vocational history (Raffe and Croxford, 2015: 314). This perceived hierarchy is a reoccurring theme in higher education literature due to the relationship between higher education and social reproduction as well as the impact of neoliberalism and increased marketisation. Hence, this is of particular interest when exploring class inequalities due to the inequitable distribution of resources within a stratified class system; meaning students from advantaged social backgrounds are most likely to enter high-status institutions, while students from low socioeconomic backgrounds disproportionately enter lower-status institutions. This indicates students are more likely to choose a university they are likely to be accepted into

rather than ones they would ideally like to attend. Further, the institutional hierarchy is also important when exploring social mobility, as universities gain their position depending on graduate outcomes and employers' desire to recruit from elite institutions (Raffe and Croxford, 2015: 317). In this context, and against a neoliberal backdrop, much of the literature understood the impact of marketisation to be the primary underpinning factor of the institutional hierarchy, which in turn reflects class stratification in wider society.

The disparity in accessibility of higher education institutions arguably reflects market pressures such as the increasing costs of obtaining a university degree (Purcell and Elias, 2004). Market-driven policies aimed to put 'students at the heart of the higher education system' to empower them as consumers, meaning institutions need to adjust their provision to meet student demands or risk losing market share (Raffe and Croxford, 2015: 316). While this argument assumes that status is not a fixed concept and students' choice is based on a range of factors such as the quality, relevance and price of the programme, institutions typically pursue strategies that reinforce their market provision and position in the hierarchy (Marginson, 2004). Nevertheless, market pressures have infested the higher education sector in Scotland and England differently; and so Raffe and Croxford (2015) employ a comparative analysis to highlight the importance of marketisation in reinforcing class inequalities within the institutional hierarchy in each context. Arguably one of the most significant differences is that tuition fees are free for students in Scotland, while they continue to increase in England (2015: 312). Hence, Raffe and Croxford (2015) argue that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly in England, are less likely to attend or even apply to university due to financial anxieties; and found that while there was an element of cultural anxiety such as a fear of 'fitting in', the monetary aspects were of particular concern and prevent working-class students considering higher education as a viable option (2015: 319). Further, while there was slightly weaker evidence of a sustained institutional hierarchy in Scotland - and students believed many of their financial anxieties were alleviated as they do not need to pay tuition fees - the hierarchy is still reluctant to change and continues to impact greatly on class inequalities within higher education (2015: 321). Nevertheless, it is important to note that research exploring market impacts on the institutional hierarchy does not focus on other parts of the UK as Northern Ireland's two universities were both established before 1992; and Wales' long-established institutions only gained university status after 1992 due to their previous titles as constituent colleges of the University of Wales (2015: 315).

Therefore, 'elite' institutions are able to attract students from the most advantaged backgrounds which further enhances the university's reputation and links with employers, consequently reinforcing positional advantage and institutional hierarchy. While culture is not a primary factor in sustaining the institutional hierarchy according to Raffe and Croxford (2015), cultural capital in its institutionalised form is able to help individuals navigate the marketized higher education sector through the possession of qualifications (2015: 316). Post-1992 universities tend to have more relaxed entry requirements in terms of qualifications compared to elite institutions; and so institutionalised cultural capital can sometimes be used to challenge the class inequalities that exist within the stratified higher education sector to allow for social mobility. However, Raffe and Croxford (2015) dismiss the argument that Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory can explain the institutional hierarchy, or why working-class students tend to enter post-1992 universities while elite universities continue to be occupied by the middle and upper classes. Instead, they perceive culture as a contributory factor to the illusion of a meritocratic society which diverts attention away from how increased marketisation and neoliberalism reinforces middle- and upper-class students' dominant position within the field of education, and in turn within wider social and economic structures. Therefore, the institutional hierarchy provides the environment through which class inequalities are reproduced in the higher education sector; and while institutionalised cultural capital creates the appearance of a meritocratic society, market pressures are the primary underpinning factor of the institutional hierarchy. Hence, Raffe and Croxford (2015) argue the concept of cultural capital and its location within Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory no longer offers a significant explanatory power when exploring the UK's higher education system after large-scale marketisation.

### *The Importance of Context*

Cultural theories have been criticised for applying a unidimensional analysis to complex and multi-layered class inequalities within the UK higher education system. Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory insists students from socially advantaged backgrounds perform better in academic settings due to their pre-exposed attachment to the dominant institutional culture; while students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to adapt to the institutional environment, will perform worse and are more likely to self-exclude from the education system due to their lack of cultural capital (Van de Werfhorst, 2010: 157). However, critical research argues this is a binary and deterministic attempt – in that cultural



capital is either something one possesses or does not – to describe often multi-layered and complex practices through which class inequalities are manifested in the UK's higher education system. Further, cultural-based approaches such as Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory are not compatible with well statistical trends in educational inequality. As discussed in relation to marketisation, massive educational expansion can be observed in the UK and in other western societies for both the middle and working classes; and it is not the case that working-class individuals have refrained from educational participation due to their lack of cultural capital as cultural theories would suggest. For example, full-time enrolments in universities have increased by 21.4% since 2007; and, while still not proportionate, university application rates from those living in the most deprived areas in England, Wales and Northern Ireland have been steadily increasing over the past decade (Universities UK, 2018). Critiques of Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory therefore question the continued relevance of the concept of cultural capital in explaining class inequalities within higher education after large-scale expansion of the sector.

Van de Werfhorst (2010) therefore rejects the central premise of Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory as he argues when education expands, more working-class children will adapt to the schooling culture; and the institutional environment itself will become more inclusionary towards working-class students. While he acknowledges there is an element of culture that affects working-class representation and integration into higher education, he argues the statistics of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds entering university do not reflect Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory; and therefore suggests his concept of cultural capital is not the preeminent force he suggests, or perhaps once was, prior to large-scale expansion. Instead, the application of 'cultural capital' should incorporate a multidimensional approach to explore class inequalities within specific subjects within universities; and to examine the process which leads to working-class people attend post-1992 universities, while middle-class people occupy elite institutions. For example, Van de Werfhorst (2010) demonstrates that students' accessibility and experiences in the cultural, teaching and care fields are positively affected by parents' cultural capital; whereas experiences in economic and legal fields are less impacted by culture and more impacted by possession of economic capital. Hence, extending the analysis of Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory to incorporate multiple dimensions in terms of subject choices may lead to different conclusions as to the role of culture in the intergenerational social mobility process, which a standardised, blanket employment of the concept does not offer (2010: 164).

Furthermore, while a plethora of literature has presented strong evidence of the relationship between socioeconomic status, cultural background and educational opportunities, fewer pieces of research fully investigate the impacts of this in different institutions which occupy different positions in the institutional hierarchy. The application of Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory has largely focussed on how the accumulation of cultural capital through the family setting impacts students' educational opportunities and academic success (Bourdieu, 1986). However, this approach to analysing class inequalities and operationalising the concept has almost exclusively focussed on the 'objectified state' of cultural capital to explore how cultures within households can be transmitted through the family to reproduce social advantage. However, Van de Werfhorst (2010) argues parents' institutionalised and embodied cultural capital cannot be operationalised as this in itself cannot be used for their child's social mobility. The multidimensionality of resources is relevant for understanding inequalities and distinctions in a wide array of life domains, including stratification. Therefore, he argues Bourdieu's framework looks at class inequalities and educational outcomes in a unidimensional fashion to predict how various factors can lead to single probable outcomes in the field of education (Bourdieu, 1986: 246). Instead, he suggests Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory should be revisited and reapplied based on all forms of cultural capital to avoid a deterministic narrative; and how these are then manifested in various aspects of the higher education system (Van de Werfhorst, 2010: 160).

In addition, supporting literature suggests cultural capital is a constant source of class-based advantage for middle-class students and therefore has an immediate positive effect on educational outcomes. However, this literature often ignores the reality that not all middle-class parents regularly intervene in their child's education and so the study of this relationship in greater detail is imperative to comprehend the mechanisms that drive social inequality (Khan, 2011). From focus groups and qualitative data analysis, Yi-Lin (2018) finds that parental use of cultural capital is often not normative, everyday behaviour; and so focusses on the distinction between *possession* and *activation* of cultural capital when discussing class-based advantage in the field of higher education (2018: 504). Critical analyses of Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory highlight the importance of this distinction as opposed to a blanket application of the framework, as parental activation of cultural capital takes on different forms and meanings across educational systems. For example, in exam-centric systems such as the UK, parents' cultural capital can be used to prepare children for high-

stake exams and to increase chances of university admission. In contrast, the higher education system in the USA favours athletic talent and artistic accomplishments as well as academic success (2018: 507). Hence, while middle-class parents may be familiar with the dominant culture of higher education, they must choose when to activate their cultural capital when necessary to transmit this knowledge on to their children. Nevertheless, class inequality still exists as this is a privilege limited to middle-class parents; but literature must explore this process in greater depth to understand the relevance of the concept of cultural capital to educational inequalities.

Looking at this relationship further, Yi-Lin (2018) found that despite being rich in cultural capital, middle-class parents relied heavily on teachers to prepare students for exams and support their academic journey. Contrary to Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory, the significant relationship in a person's educational development is between the student and teacher as opposed to parents who often have minimal involvement in their child's education such as 'paying for fees' or 'occasionally attending parent-teacher meetings' (2018: 511). However, depending on students' higher education experiences, certain situations call for parents to activate their cultural capital to support students through "bumpy pathways" (2018: 510). For example, Yi-Lin (2018) observed that middle-class parents did aggressively and strategically activate their cultural capital when their children's performance declined; and this acted as a buffer that increased students' chance to obtain elite university admission. Therefore, while most middle-class parents possess advantageous cultural capital that can be transmitted through family structures to positively shape children's educational experiences, only a handful of parents felt the need to activate this. Yi-Lin's (2018) study therefore criticises Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory and application of cultural capital as a concept for being too deterministic in its approach; and ignores the difference between the possession and activation of cultural capital. Supportive studies of Bourdieu's theory present parents' possession of cultural capital as an automatic and immediate advantage to students in navigating the higher education system due to the importance of family structures in its transmission. Hence, enhancing educational equality requires a more nuanced understanding of how middle-class students navigate the education system to maintain their dominant position within the field, and in turn wider society.

### **Cultural Capital as a Limited Concept**

This section will discuss the literature that considers the concept of cultural capital in the field of higher education and advocates for its continued relevance in particular contexts. However, the literature within this section acknowledges the critiques of cultural capital's deterministic application, and so argues the concept should be dissected and applied in various contexts in relation to the UK higher education system to highlight its specific use in that setting. Critiques of Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory express concern that the application of cultural capital in the supporting literature does not explain class inequalities in different types of institutions; does not consider all dimensions of inequalities due to its unidimensional approach; and does not consider the importance of staff relationships with students. This section will therefore be structured according to these themes to discuss the literature that acknowledges these criticisms but does not dismiss the concept of cultural capital in its entirety. Through this discussion, literature is able to advocate for the continued relevance of cultural capital as an analytical tool but within particular fields and contexts.

### *Type of Institution*

Following Van de Werfhorst's (2010) criticism of the unidimensional application of Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory, it is important to consider how class inequalities are manifested in the field of higher education in greater detail. Increased marketisation and large-scale expansion of the UK's higher education system underpins the existing institutional hierarchy, within which social origin of students is the principle actor of differentiation (Robbins, 2005: 17). This relationship is significant in the discussion of class inequalities and social mobility as elite universities increase chances of upward mobility for working-class students to a far greater extent than lower tier institutions" (Bowen and Bok, 1998). Hence, looking at class inequalities within this hierarchy, Robbins (2005) argues social exclusion in education is a continuous process underpinned by inequitable accumulation of cultural capital; and this relationship is exemplified in the inequality of access to elite institutions for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. For example, the 'massification' of higher education has led to an increase in working-class students entering university, but it has also resulted in a stratified system that reflects societal class inequalities where the majority of those students attend 'low status, poorly resourced institutions' (Crozier et al., 2008). Hence, Reay (2016) argues one must look beyond the statistics to fully appreciate the extent of the inequalities that persist within the higher education system. While there has been a significant improvement in working class

representation in the UK higher education system, it is important to look at representation in various universities throughout the institutional hierarchy and analyse this through a cultural lens to determine cultural capital's continued relevance in each of these settings (2005: 23).

Therefore, the problem for working-class students is no longer one of admission, but the inability to reach elite universities; and this demonstrates how the marketized higher education sector in the UK largely helps to reproduce class inequalities rather than challenge them (Reay, 2016). Robbins (2005) examines this inequality through the concept of cultural capital and the importance of understanding social discourses through the prism of agency by deploying traditional language of economics to explore cultural exchange (2005: 15). For example, less than 3% of students admitted to Oxford in 2012 came from 'low participation neighbourhoods' against the benchmark of 4.8% (Grove, 2012). Reay et al. (2009) identifies one of the key barriers to accessibility for working-class students in elite universities is the anxieties around fitting in to such an unfamiliar environment. Hence, social class is still the main determinant of success in the UK's higher education system even after its massification; but this is now particularly the case when preventing opportunities for socially disadvantaged students from entering elite institutions with private school students being 55 times more likely to attend Oxford or Cambridge than those who are state school educated (Vasager, 2010). Hence, while literature such as the Universities UK (2018) outlines increasing diversity in higher education, it is also important to look beyond the statistics as with diversity has become a deeply hierarchical system. While those at the bottom have a variety of students from various ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds, elite universities are only slightly more diverse than they were a few decades ago (Vasager, 2010).

Therefore, Robbins (2005) pinpoints misrepresentation of working-class students to cultural factors, in that these students find it difficult to reconcile their habitus to those cultures which carry value and power in elite institutions (2005: 25). Culture provides the grounds for human interaction and communication, but it is also a source of domination and is a fundamental dimension of all social life (Swartz, 2012). By giving culture its own space within social class discourse, Bourdieu's work raised questions for the relationship between statistical projections and the immanent life-chances of those social agents. However, while this broadly supports Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory, Robbins (2005) emphasises these models are not universal but provide a framework through which particular conditions can be looked at in that specific context (2005: 27). Hence, cultural capital is a useful tool in

explaining the anxieties working-class students experience around ‘fitting in’; which consequently makes them less likely to apply to elite institutions (Reay, 2016). As post-1992 universities have invested greatly in widening participation programmes and have more relaxed entry requirements, working-class students are more likely to resonate with the culture and habitus of those institutions, which in turn reinforces the institutional hierarchy in the UK higher education system and reproduces class inequalities and stratification through cultural reproduction.

In addition, Sheng (2016) focusses on how class inequalities are manifested in the UK’s higher education system as class stratification restricts the choices available to young people from the working class (Hutchings and Archer, 2001). The experience of higher education is no longer uncommon and university degrees are not as prestigious as they once were; and so large-scale expansion of university access has contributed to much fiercer competition for admission to top universities (Sheng, 2016: 729). In support of Reay (2016), the focus of educational analyses and higher education policy should therefore no longer be the issue of admission, but the barriers preventing working-class students entering elite universities; and the concept of cultural capital should be employed in this context. Using regression models, Sheng (2016) observed that due to their lack of effective capital, the majority of working-class students have to adopt a pragmatic approach to higher education choice. Variables such as ‘family income’ and ‘fathers’ educational background’ were included in her analysis and found that middle-class students were far more likely to study at an elite university than students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Middle-class parents have the cultural resources to explore the complexities of educational opportunities more effectively than their working-class counterparts by transmitting ‘strong influences’ of educational choices (Sheng, 2016: 731). Hence, in the decision-making process, middle-class applicants were positioned in a sphere in which the diverse influences of parents and professors reinforced each other, which made the decision-making straight forward. However, while it is important to acknowledge the importance of ‘activating’ cultural capital to reap its benefits, the influence that middle-class parents have on their children allows them to navigate the higher education system with a sense of entitlement and certainty (Bourdieu, 1990: 108). Despite these complexities, some working class students within Sheng’s (2016) study who received the required grades still chose to go to elite universities despite their lack of cultural competency, and therefore supports Raffe and Croxford’s (2015) observation that cultural capital in its institutionalised form can be used to navigate the field and promote social mobility. On the

other hand, the pragmatic way in which working-class students need to approach university applications caused a number of participants within Sheng's (2016) study to self-exclude from the education system; and demonstrates how cultural capital works to limit the choices of working-class students (2016: 733). This illustrates how the cultural capital of the subordinated classes can reinforce their disadvantage by inhibiting their demands of access to higher education, defining it as "not for the likes of us" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 205).

### *Omitted Variable Bias*

According to Bourdieu, cultural capital is a scarce resource that equips individuals with knowledge and skills that is recognised and rewarded by institutional gatekeepers. While there is widespread support for Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory, existing research has been limited in its ability to adequately test the causality of levels of cultural capital and educational outcomes. The main reason for this limitation is that the effect of cultural capital variables in existing studies cannot be attributed purely to cultural capital, but instead capture other characteristics that are correlated with, but are different from, cultural capital.

Consequently, very few pieces of literature focus on the core hypothesis of Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory: that cultural capital *causes* educational success; and so existing research has likely overstated the effect of cultural capital on class stratification and educational success (Sullivan, 2001). For example, in the family setting, parents who possess high levels of cultural capital also possess other valuable resources on children's academic achievement; and individuals who possess high levels of cultural capital also possess other skills that promote educational success such as high levels of ability and ambition (Jaeger, 2010: 282). Consequently, the problem of omitted variable bias is not solely a methodological problem; but a problem that has important implications for substantive conclusions regarding the effect of cultural capital on educational success.

Jaeger (2010) combines within-family and within-individual research designs to address unobserved variables when analysing the effect of cultural capital on academic achievement. This approach allowed the research to identify any confounding and unobserved effects that have led to imprecise estimates of the effects of cultural capital on educational success. According to Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory, cultural capital promotes educational success through different channels. Firstly, children inherit cultural capital through their parents – either passively due to exposure, or actively due to parents' sustained effort – and

this is then recognised and rewarded by the education system. This structure implies that teachers and other gatekeepers systematically misinterpret children's cultural capital, namely, their demonstrated familiarity with high-status cultural signals; and results in children who possess cultural capital and are primed to the dominant culture receiving preferential treatment from teachers and peers from the early stages of university. Jaeger (2010) demonstrates that indicators of participation in highbrow cultural activities have been the preferred operational measure of cultural capital, but other studies also include educational resource, reading habits and participation in extracurricular activities. In order to overcome the problem of omitted variable bias, Jaeger (2010) includes variables of cultural capital such as: how often the child has attended a museum or theatre performance; any extracurricular activities they participate in including sport, art and drama; and how much they are encouraged to partake in activities outside the conventional academic curriculum.

Through multiple regression models and a mix of quantitative and qualitative analysis, Jaeger (2010) argued the effectiveness of cultural capital on educational opportunities is dependent on the type that is being exercised and the socioeconomic context in which it operates. His study found that partaking in highbrow cultural activities such as theatre and museum visits has a positive impact in high socioeconomic contexts but has no effect on socially disadvantaged students. This supports Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory in suggesting that familiarity with dominant culture supports academic development in higher education where parents, peers and gatekeepers recognise and reward this type of cultural capital. In contrast, the dominant culture in low socioeconomic environments does not assist in academic development as it does not carry the same symbolic weight (2010: 285). Secondly, Jaeger (2010) found the positive effect of reading for enjoyment was consistently stronger in middle- and upper-class environments than in socially disadvantaged contexts. Again, this supports Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory as it suggests high socioeconomic environments are equipped to stimulate children's academic growth. However, Jaeger (2010) also reports a negative effect on participating in extracurricular activities for working-class students; but found the positive effect for middle-class students demonstrated by literature is less than half of the baseline models (2010: 286). This suggests parents from low socioeconomic environments are more likely to enrol their child in extracurricular activities to help support their child when they are performing poorly academically; but also enrol in low-quality extracurricular activities, due to financial constraints, that are ineffective in remedying poor academic achievement. Ultimately, Jaeger (2010) found cultural capital has



positive effects on children's academic skills and educational opportunities; and supports the principle of Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory which highlights the importance of cultural capital in the analysis of class inequalities in the field of education. However, the effect of cultural capital on educational opportunities is generally weaker than previously suggested. Consequently, while cultural capital has a statistically significant effect on academic achievement, its substantial impact in terms of exploring educational inequalities is modest (2010: 287). Jaeger (2010) also found the effects of different dimensions of cultural capital differ across the distribution of socioeconomic contexts. He finds the indicators of participation in highbrow culture and the child's reading habits have stronger effects on academic achievement in high socioeconomic environments than in socially disadvantaged contexts. These results support Bourdieu's cultural reproduction model in suggesting that highbrow aspects of cultural capital are mostly rewarded in environments that recognise and appreciate these aspects of cultural capital, such as higher education institutions. However, participation in and encouragement to enter extracurricular activities have a much weaker effect than presented in mainstream literature and so highlights some limitations of the concept of cultural capital which must be considered when evaluating its continued relevance.

### *Staff Backgrounds and Pedagogic Communication*

Bourdieu's work focusses heavily on the impact of family structures in the transmission of cultural capital, but does not fully consider how interactions outside of the home environment influence the acquisition of cultural capital or how these experiences moderate the relationship between social class and academic engagement. Critical literature therefore also highlights the importance of staff-student relationships in the exploration of how class inequalities are reproduced in higher education; and this is especially powerful given the seemingly mundane nature of this communication that occurs daily (Rudick et al, 2019). This is particularly relevant for working-class students who cannot get the effective and direct support they need from family members to assist smooth transitioning into university. The importance of pedagogic communication can be exemplified in the exploration of extracurricular activities, and how certain activities carry class values which benefit some students academically. As such, Yosso (2005) adopted a critical approach to Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory to investigate the process through which particular class values become attached to certain activities. This approach adheres to the importance of dissecting

the concept of cultural capital to avoid deterministic arguments; and focusses on institutional structures and pedagogy rather than the individual. Primarily, academic staff believe activities should be recommended or facilitated by them to create a substantial link between the curricular and extracurricular to assist in academic development. Cultural disparities mean middle-class students are most likely to participate in these activities, highlighting how pedagogic communication of what constitutes as a 'valuable' extracurricular activity can reinforce existing class inequalities in the field of higher education (2005: 68). Alternatively, other forms of activities which are most often carried out by working-class students such as caring responsibilities and paid employment are not as valued in the field of higher education according to teachers (2005: 69). As such, middle-class experiences are normalised within higher education institutions and this reinforces the power structures within that particular field, thereby 'othering' any experiences which are contrary to the dominant culture (Moore, 2004). Therefore, the concept of cultural capital must be dissected in order to explore how class-values have been attributed to certain activities through pedagogic communication. Regarding cultural capital in a binary way – in that it is either something you have or do not – normalises and naturalises the middle-class degree of knowledge and puts the onus on others to match the knowledge or suffer from consequences such as social identity threat (Murphy et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2011).

Staff members draw upon their own judgements on what might and might not be valuable in the field of education based on their own academic and class backgrounds. This causes some activities to be valued within the field of higher education, while others are considered a distraction to academic achievement (Clegg et al., 2009). Through probing staff members' opinion on paid work; art; drama; music; faith and cultural activities; political activity; and domestic and caring responsibilities, Clegg et al. (2009) found staff members' understanding of curricular and extracurricular activities are "blurred, overlapping and inconsistently applied" (2009: 617). Further, while recognition of extracurricular activities and cultural capital itself is important, staff identities have to be accounted for such as their class background and social positions, as well as the positions they attribute to their students. This therefore highlights the importance of considering staff-student relationships in the analysis of how class inequalities are manifested in contemporary higher education structures, and how in turn this helps to perpetuate class stratification. For example, 'volunteering and work experience' and 'paid employment' are similar activities, but academic staff believed the latter had a negative impact on curricular studies as it is regarded to be purely for economic

purposes rather than to support students' skills development (2009: 617). Hence, cultural capital should not be applied in a binary fashion as this risks omitting key structural aspects of the analysis. Hence, Clegg et al. (2009) argue it is only by dissecting and analysing the concept of cultural capital can the methods through which class inequalities within higher education can be illuminated through pedagogic communication. While the concept of cultural capital is still relevant to the analysis of class inequalities, applying the concept in its broadest form does not allow for the appropriate structural analysis of how the middle class experience is preserved as the norm within the field nor does it allow for the exploration of these inequality creating structures can be challenged from a social justice perspective. Structural factors such as pedagogic communication have the power to determine what activities are considered valuable in the field of higher education and are therefore able to reproduce inequality creating structures. Structural elements should therefore be incorporated and addressed within Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory to ensure its continued relevance in the UK higher education system (Clegg et al., 2009).

The findings raise a number of important issues, specifically: the relationship between theory and method; definitional confusion; and the question of culture and its place in educational research. This chapter will therefore be structured according to these themes in order to discuss recommendations that are relevant to the research question and higher education discourse. Despite plausible critiques of cultural capital's continued relevance in the field of higher education, few pieces of literature reject the concept in its entirety due to its ability to explain how working-class students are academically disadvantaged compared to their middle-class peers; and offers a framework through which persistent class inequalities in the field of higher education can be explored. Nevertheless, discussions around cultural capital and Bourdieu's wider cultural reproduction theory should be rigorously and continuously evaluated to consider the extent to which they are still relevant in exploring contemporary class issues. Bourdieu's framework should acknowledge the complexities of class inequalities in higher education brought about by marketisation; and literature should evaluate its continued relevance within that context.

### **Theory and Methodology**

From the literature presented, it is evident that Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory and concept of cultural capital is still relevant in the analysis of class inequalities within the UK's higher education system to a significant extent. However, as Bourdieu did not specify what he meant by 'culture' in his work, this has led to the inconsistent application of the concept of cultural capital by different researchers. As such, varying conclusions have emerged regarding the continued relevance of the concept in the field of higher education, thereby highlighting the importance of continuously revisiting its application through the rigorous process of reflexivity that Bourdieu applied to his own work. From the appraisal, it is evident that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds face persistent barriers both in terms of accessing university and their experiences when they are there; and so Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital has been applied to dissect the process of power and privilege within the field of education (Murphy, 2011). Supporting literature reinforces this element of cultural reproduction theory and points to empirical examples such as misrepresentation in the UK higher education system of working-class students and the anxieties students from low

socioeconomic backgrounds face when placed in such an unfamiliar environment. However, the literature also presents credible critiques of cultural capital, including being a secondary determinant of class inequalities to marketization; and considering cultural capital in a way that encourages deficit thinking and unidimensional analysis, which is not compatible with the complexities of class inequalities, power and privilege. Research on cultural capital's significance should also consider other potential confounding variables which affect the causality of the concept's influence; and so should be considered when making substantive conclusions on the impact of cultural capital in class analysis. It is therefore a recommendation of this research that future considerations adopt an intersectional approach to class analysis to investigate other variables such as 'race' and gender. Chapter one of this research outlines the neoliberal backdrop within which the UK higher education system currently exists and so the impact of the market cannot be overstated in the expansion and repurposing of higher education institutions. Despite plausible critiques of cultural capital's continued relevance in this context, supporting literature demonstrates its usefulness in highlighting how structure and agency interact to reinforce and reproduce systemic class inequalities of wider society in an increasingly marketized and hierarchical higher education system.

However, the appraisal raises methodological concerns in terms of conceptualising and operationalising 'cultural capital' in qualitative analyses (Orr, 2003). Qualitative approaches are critiqued for being small-scaled, insufficiently rigorous and outcomes biased, as well as having little impact on institutional practices. Despite an increase in qualitative analyses of cultural capital, researchers often use quantitative approaches to produce 'hard evidence' (Grenfell and James, 2004). 'Cultural capital' is often difficult to operationalise in qualitative research, but nonetheless are important to the analysis of individual experiences. Qualitative research offers an in-depth exploration of theory and practice and therefore highlights the importance of considering a comprehensive evidence-base to educational inequalities composed of various research methods. There are also methodological concerns with attempts to operationalise 'cultural capital' in quantitative analyses. Economic capital is often measured through the lens of wealth by asking participants their individual or family income, for example. However, cultural capital is often measured by survey instruments focussing on objectified cultural capital (e.g how many books do you own?) or institutionalised cultural capital (e.g what are your parents' highest level of education?). When cultural capital is operationalised as reading books or obtaining a degree, this results in the relative neglect in

understanding embodied cultural capital, which the literature highlights is an important aspect in privileging middle-class students in the politics of everyday life. This also imposes a deterministic and individualistic analysis into the sociology of education where individuals' lack of economic and social mobility is due to their own shortcomings rather than the failure of structures (Yosso, 2005). As exemplified in Yosso's (2005) study, cultural capital is unevenly distributed – not due to individuals' failure to act rationally, but because what counts as capital shifts to protect the interests of elites to maintain class stratification. As such, Bourdieu's work stresses it is important to explore how cultural capital works in the organisation of fields so interventions can be made to challenge those systems that reinforce wider societal inequalities. However, it is acknowledged that Bourdieu's work is reluctant in offering explicit definitions of his conceptual tools; and so given the theoretical vagueness of cultural capital as a concept, there is little consensus in the literature about which operational measures come closest to Bourdieu's theoretical concept of cultural capital. As such, it is suggested that future discussions on the relevance of the concept should incorporate a range of methodological approaches to contribute to a comprehensive evidence base for public policy discussion.

Nevertheless, there is very little research that rejects cultural capital as a concept in its entirety, but there has to be a refocus on its explanatory power depending on the field and context it is being applied to. In particular, the concept should be rigorously evaluated in the context of an increasingly marketized higher education system after large-scale expansion. Cultural capital is often employed to explain general trends of working-class underrepresentation in higher education, but marketisation has changed the structures of the higher education system, and in turn how class inequalities are manifested within these. Despite an increase of working-class people in the UK entering higher education, other higher education literature points to social class as a key determinant of which *type* of institution a person attends within the institutional hierarchy; acknowledging that elite universities offer greater educational opportunities in terms of status and employment and yet continue to be occupied by middle- and upper-class students. Therefore, Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory and concept of cultural capital should be revisited and refocussed to explore the complexity of class inequalities in the context of marketisation and large-scale expansion to ensure its continued relevance in the field, and is therefore a recommendation for future research.

## **Definitional Concerns: ‘Cultural Capital’ as an Umbrella Term**

This research aimed to conduct its analysis in the spirit of Bourdieu, adopting a rigorous and reflexive approach to the analysis of the concept of cultural capital. Bourdieu outlined three forms of cultural capital as part of his ‘thinking tools’: institutionalised, objectified and embodied (Bourdieu, 1986). From the literature, this research observed few scholars explore cultural capital according to these categories and instead base their analysis on cultural capital as a broad umbrella term. While some literature such as Moore (2004) and Leese (2010) insinuated it was embodied cultural capital they were discussing, none of the literature within this research explicitly states this as a key part of their analysis. For example, aspects such as speech, demeanour and language were discussed more frequently in the literature than paintings or books, for example. While there was some reference to qualifications in Raffe and Croxford’s (2015) observations, this was not referred to as ‘institutionalised cultural capital’ and was only discussed briefly in relation to meritocracy. Further, although sometimes implied, there was no comparative analysis in the literature between the different types of cultural capital which would have strengthened the conclusions and provided a strong basis upon which the various types of cultural capital can be explored. The lack of specification on which type of cultural capital was being discussed is potentially why there was a variety of conclusions produced and it is therefore a suggestion of this research that future considerations of the concept should specifically state which form of cultural capital is being discussed.

The importance of emphasising which type of cultural capital is being discussed is inherently linked to the debate of what ‘culture’ itself is; as this is a concept that is often used and applied in literature without any critical thought. In sociology, ‘culture’ has gone through a succession of paradigm shifts (Cohen, 1993: 195). In the past, culture was employed to suggest a determination of behaviour, in that one’s actions mirrored the environment they were accustomed to; and that people were individual representations of a larger social and cultural entity. However, Cohen (1993) argues “the temptation to depict culture as the monolithic determinant of behaviour” must be ignored as this does not allow for the exploration of ‘identity’. More contemporary studies regard culture as “something that *aggregates* people and process, rather than *integrates*” in that implies difference rather than similarity (Cohen, 1993: 196). This is largely supported in the literature concerning class inequalities in higher education where people have become active in the creation of culture

rather than the passive receiving of it; and this is reflected in Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory which focusses on how culture intercepts structure and agency to underline power relations and create inequality among social classes. Nevertheless, the application of culture was generally applied without critical thought in the literature; and so it is a recommendation of this research that applications of this concept adopt Bourdieu's reflexive approach to analysis in order to strengthen conclusions and findings of the continued relevance of cultural capital as a concept.

Hence, while all forms of cultural capital embody power, it is important when exploring the relevance of cultural capital to discuss how each type of cultural capital serves its own purpose in particular fields and settings; and how each one is potentially more relevant within different contexts. For example, while institutionalised cultural capital such as qualifications may have assisted in the initial entry stage to higher education, embodied cultural capital in the form of language and demeanour can assist students in adapting to the dominant culture within the university, giving them the best chance to 'fit in', meaning they are less likely to drop out due to feelings of anxiety and an out-of-place social identity (Johnson et al., 2011). The literature within this research primarily discusses characteristics of cultural capital which can be considered as 'institutional' or 'embodied'. Importantly, literature also emphasises that cultural capital entails more than being conversant with high-brow cultural activities, but instead requires adaptive cultural competencies such as familiarity with relevant institutional processes and contexts. Through this rigorous and reflexive approach, it is therefore identified that objectified cultural capital, despite being most easily operationalised, is arguably less important in the relationship between social class and educational inequalities than cultural capital in its institutionalised and embodied form. Further, much of the existing literature on this topic captures their analysis at a static time where the level of cultural capital is measured and this is then linked to level of academic achievement at a subsequent date (Rudick et al., 2009). This type of approach does not capture the dynamics of how parents invest their cultural capital in children during childhood, how cultural capital is activated at crucial points in a child's academic journey, how children accrue cultural capital and how these processes jointly generate educational success. It is therefore suggested that future research adopts a longitudinal approach which would allow for the evaluation of cultural capital over a sustained period of time to obtain a better understanding of its affects and relevance in the sociology of education; and will be a valuable element to the comprehensive evidence base for public policy discussion.



## **Culturalist Approaches to Class Inequalities in Higher Education**

Pierre Bourdieu has undoubtedly played a key part in bringing cultural factors to the forefront of class analysis. Macro-level economics has dominated discourse within the sociology of education, such as the work of Karl Marx, and is useful in analysing the redistributive element of social justice. However, a strong primary focus on economic structures has meant cultural and societal factors are often neglected. Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory on the other hand offers a lens through which inequality of cultural capital can be explained, and particularly how this translates into success within the field of higher education. Bourdieu's theory demonstrates how culture transcends the dichotomy of structure and agency to create a framework which aims to explain how social classes are organised and how classes become dominated within certain fields, namely higher education. From the literature discussed and despite a variety of conflicting conclusions, cultural approaches to class inequalities in higher education have significantly impacted the way in which scholars observe the UK higher education system in that they believe it is an important factor to consider, even if they do not believe it is a primary determinant of class inequalities. The results from the discussion of the literature feed into larger discussions regarding cultural capital and cultural approaches to social stratification in two regards. Firstly, given the widespread acceptance of Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory, the concept of cultural capital is still only supported by a limited number of empirical studies that convincingly test the core causal hypotheses of this theory whilst taking into consideration other variables. It is therefore important to mount better empirical tests of cultural reproduction theory and is a recommendation for future considerations. Secondly, because individuals' and families' cultural capital tends to be positively related with other types of resources – namely social and economic – it is likely that previous research has overstated the effect of cultural capital on educational success. Consequently, it is important to obtain realistic estimates of the effect of cultural capital by frequently revisiting this concept.

The culturalist approach of Bourdieu has sparked conversation about the significance of reducing inequalities through education and through cultural reproduction (Matthys, 2012: 7). As such, social relationships in education correspond with the asymmetrical power structures in wider society; and as long as this remains unchanged, education will continue to reproduce existing societal inequality. Initiatives such as widening participation programmes have been

the topic of much research over the last few decades in which the ability to translate the cultural gap between middle- and working-class students is measured (Moore, 2004; Leese, 2010; Cliona et al., 2017). This therefore highlights the impact cultural approaches have had not only on sociology of education research, but empirical and practical examples in terms of higher education policy and institutional initiatives. Moreover, cultural approaches offer the opportunity to look at how mundane, everyday communication can reinforce social inequality; and this is particularly the case in higher education institutions which act as state apparatus for this through pedagogy. However, these practices are unique to each field so the analysis of cultural capital within the field of higher education might not apply to other fields in the social sphere; and it is important future research on cultural capital does not attempt to generalise these findings. Nevertheless, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and wider cultural reproduction theory provides a clear framework for understanding the process of socialisation within higher education. In order to succeed within this environment, individuals must have accrued the correct cultural capital. This process is particularly difficult for working-class students due to a previous lack of opportunity to obtain cultural capital and lack of effective and direct support from family structures, which is not the case for their middle-class peers. Nevertheless, cultural approaches should also be employed to explore how institutional structures can be adapted to support working-class students and ensure education is a field where class inequalities are significantly challenged to allow for upward social mobility.

## **Conclusion**

This research aimed to explore the extent to which cultural capital is a relevant conceptual tool to understanding educational equity; and concludes that cultural capital continues to be of analytical relevance in the exploration of contemporary class inequalities in the field of higher education to a significant extent. The literature outlined three ways in which cultural capital is perceived in relation to its relevance: significant, insignificant and limited. By structuring the discussion according to these perceptions, this research demonstrates how cultural capital can help explain persistent class inequalities in the UK higher education system in terms of misrepresentation and institutional culture; but also highlights the importance of engaging with the wider architecture of Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory to rigorously investigate the relationship between social class and educational

opportunities. Within this framework, cultural capital remains a significant conceptual tool in analysing how middle-class experiences are normalised in universities, meaning working-class students are less likely to consider higher education as a viable option; and how exercises such as widening participation programmes should be a long-term effort to help facilitate a smooth transition into university for working-class students by adapting institutional structures to facilitate cultural parity.

Nevertheless, critical literature on this topic suggests cultural capital should not be discussed in a deterministic and deficit fashion, but should be applied strategically to investigate other confounding factors that are associated with educational opportunities and academic success. There must also be recognition that these qualities are not distributed equally across the socioeconomic spectrum; and these discrepancies tend to be transmitted intergenerationally through both family structures and pedagogic communication. Furthermore, while cultural capital continues to be of significant relevance to the analysis of class inequalities within the field of education, it is essential this is continuously revisited and refocussed to consider the impact of market pressures and large-scale expansion of the sector in a neoliberal context which has notably seen more working-class students entering university. Marketisation has resulted in a deeply hierarchical system that works to reproduce the stratified class system of wider society; and so cultural capital cannot be employed as a blanket conceptual tool to this analysis but must focus on the cultural disparities which lead to working-class people entering low-status institutions. Indeed, even Bourdieu recognises the importance of considering the socio-historical contingency of concepts which have differing degrees of relevance in different contexts; and this is reflected in his theory as part of his rigorous and reflexive approach to his analysis. Further, cultural capital exists in three forms: institutionalised, objectified and embodied; and these should be given greater attention to strengthen existing literature that advocates for the concept's continued relevance. While it is acknowledged that all forms of cultural capital embody power and privilege, future research should focus specifically on which form is of most relevance in a particular context, thereby moving from a broad application of the concept to the consideration of 'which type of culture to use in which situation' (Erikson, 2008: 347).

Overall, cultural capital is a useful conceptual tool to explore the relationship between social class and educational opportunities in the contemporary UK higher education system. Cultural capital should be considered within the wider architecture of Bourdieu's cultural

reproduction theory in order to consider other structural factors that impact educational opportunities such as the middle-class norms of institutions, student engagement strategies and pedagogic communication. Taking these factors into consideration, Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory provides a rigorous framework through which the increasingly marketized higher education system can be analysed; and the methods through which institutional hierarchy and structures works to reproduce the class stratification that exist within wider society. By using Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory within the neoliberal context within which the higher education system operates in the UK, these findings are able to contribute to a comprehensive evidence base on public policy approaches to tackling class inequalities in the UK higher education system.

## Chapter Four                      Bibliography

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