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Parental Cultural Capital Investments and the Production of Social Class Differentials in Educational Attainment: A Counterfactual Analysis

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Background

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of reproduction in education is widely regarded as among the most significant contributions to the sociology of educational stratification (Bourdieu and Passeron 1970; Bourdieu 1977). According to Bourdieu, higher-class children attain more schooling than their lower class peers, because higher-class parents, advertently and inadvertently, invest more heavily in the language styles and cultural signals that schools reward. Through rearing practices involving organized activities, concerted skill development, and strategic interactions with school gatekeepers, higher-class parents pass on to their children a sense of entitlement that provides the children with long-run comparative advantages in schools. In contrast, lower-class parents place less emphasis on the concerted cultivation of their children, establishing (rather than deliberately engaging with) the boundaries within which their children unfold their childhoods (Lareau 2003). Because these class-based differences in the mode of socialization vary by the extent to which they conform to institutionalized evaluation criteria in schools, they form a core component in the transmission of social advantage over generations, helping to maintain or even perpetuate class inequalities in educational attainment.

Despite decades of research demonstrating the effects of cultural capital on academic achievement and educational attainment (for a review, see Jæger 2012), however, research has yet to empirically test the stipulation, central to Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction, that parents' cultural capital investments in their children perpetuate class inequalities in educational attainment. This paper provides such test. We adopt a formal model that assumes that parents self-select into cultural capital activities on the expected, academic gains of their children. From this model, we derive the counterfactual prediction that *had parental cultural capital investments been more equally distributed among the social classes, social class differentials in educational attainment would reduce significantly*. Applying an endogenous switching regression model to data from the Child and Young Adults supplement of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY-CYA), we empirically test the prediction. Our empirical analysis corroborates the prediction—thus indicating that parents' investments in cultural capital are a key mechanisms through which social advantage is maintained over generations.

Data and Methods

The NLSY-CYA covers all children born to women of the NLSY79 (the NLSY79 being a national probability sample). These children have been surveyed biennially from 1986 through 2010. For our purposes, we use a subsample of 4,681 children, who are (a) old enough to have completed high school and (b) have no missing information on the variables used in the analyses.

Our dependent variable, *educational attainment*, is measured by proxy as whether (=1) or not (=0) the child attended the college preparatory track in high school. Although this measure is not a perfect measure for educational attainment, attending the college-bound track is selective and correlates significantly with ultimate educational attainment (Lucas 1999), thus sufficing for testing the theoretical prediction of interest to this study.

For our measure of *parental cultural capital investments*, we construct an index using factor analysis. We use the principle factor derived from a range of indicators of cultural rearing activities measured at multiple times during childhood (from 0 through 14 years of age). These include the no. of books the child has, whether the parents read for the child, whether the parents take the child to a museum, whether the parents encourage hobbies, and whether parents discuss TV programs with the child. To simplify the counterfactual analyses, we split this index at its median, yielding two groups of parents that lie either below or above the median in the distribution of cultural capital investments. We refer to those below the median as “low cultural capital investors” and those above as “high cultural capital investors”.

For our measure of *social class*, we use the parents’ socioeconomic status (Duncan 1961). To simplify the counterfactual analyses, we divide this variable into three equally sized groups. We also include other family background variables in our analyses, including family status, parents’ and grandparents’ educational attainment, family income, mother’s age at child’s birth, number of siblings, race, gender, and measures of the educational aspirations of mothers in adolescence (before they became mothers).

Our analytical approach involves estimating counterfactual predictions of what the fraction of college-bound students would have been, had parents with low cultural capital investments had high investments. For this purpose, we use the endogenous switching regression model (Mare and Winship 1987).¹ This model naturally leads to estimates of the effects of cultural capital investment for parents who invest heavily and for parents who invest little. Further using the model for making counterfactual predictions for the different social classes allows us to derive estimates of what the social class differences in college-bound track attendance would have been, had parents who invest little in their children’s cultural capital invested as much as do parents who invest heavily in their children’s cultural capital.

¹ We use a semiparametric version of the model that approximates the unobserved portion of the model with latent classes. We use two classes.

Results

Table 1 shows, by parental social class and out of all children in the population, the observed fractions (factual) of children of “low cultural capital investors” who attended the college preparatory track in high school. The table also shows the predicted fractions (counterfactual) that would have been observed, had these parents who invest little in their child’s cultural activities invested as much as parents who invest much. We notice that the fractions refer to the fractions of the full population of children; that is, they refer to the fractions observed/predicted at the aggregate, population level. Thus, for example, 8.9 percent of all children came from the lower third of the socioeconomic distribution and attended the college-bound track. The corresponding counterfactual percentage is 17.4 percent, suggesting that had parents who are classified as “low cultural capital investors” invested more than they in fact did, the fraction of low-SES children in the college-bound track would double (from 8.9 to 17.4).

Table 1 also shows that the difference between the factual and counterfactual fractions decline with social class. The difference among low-SES parents is 8.4 percentage points, and it is substantially lower at 4.7 percentage points among high-SES parents. This means that the potential population level effects of cultural capital on class differentials in attending the college-bound track in high school are positive. Had “low cultural capital investors” invested more in their children than they in fact do, the social class differentials would have been smaller than they in fact are. However, since these low investing parents do not invest as much as those who invest much, cultural capital investments made by parents appear to *perpetuate class differentials in educational attainment* (at least in the sense that, had these investments been more equally distributed in the population, the class differentials would be smaller than they in fact are).

Table 1 Factual and counterfactual estimates by social class of the fraction attending the college-bound track in high school among “low cultural capital investors”. The counterfactual prediction is the population fraction of “low cultural capital investors” that would have attended the college-bound track, had they been “high cultural capital investors”.

	Factual	Counterfactual	Difference	Ratio
Low SES	0.089	0.174	0.084	2.0
Middle SES	0.100	0.156	0.056	1.6
High SES	0.127	0.173	0.047	1.4
Total	0.316	0.503	0.187	-

Discussion and Conclusions

This study supports Bourdieu's prediction that investments in children's cultural capital, that parents advertently and inadvertently make, help to perpetuate social class inequalities in educational attainment. More specifically, we conclude that, had parents who invest little invested as much as parents who invest much, class inequalities in attending the college-bound track in high school would have been smaller than they in fact are. In other words, according to our study, incentivizing parents who engage their children in few cultural activities to engage them in more activities would benefit all children, but lower class children in particular, thus potentially reducing class inequalities in educational attainment.

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