Canonical treatments of the link between culture and stratification in sociology typically focus on the role of culture as a resource for the formation and differentiation of status groups (Bourdieu 1984; Beisel 1997). The classical differentiation between status situation and class situation (Weber 1946: 300–01) provides the analytic foundation and the point of departure for current work on the subject. While often conflated, the terms class and status must remain analytically distinct in order for their empirical interrelationship to be meaningfully examined (Chan and Goldthorpe 2007). The class situation is best characterized by “opportunities to gain sustenance and income” (Weber 1946: 301). The status situation, on the other hand, entails “every typical component of the fate of … individuals determined by means of a specific positive or negative social estimation” (Weber 1994: 113).

Status, in Weber’s analysis, thus “expresses itself in the specifically stylized way of life to which all aspiring members [of the relevant group] are expected to adhere” (1994: 114, emphasis added). This way of conceptualizing the status situation implies that membership in status groups can only be sustained and temporally reproduced through the “monopolization of [access to] ideal and material goods” (Weber 1994: 117, emphasis added). Accordingly, whereas “classes stratify themselves according to their relation to the production and acquisition of goods,” status groups do so according to “the principles of their consumption of goods” (Weber 1994: 119, emphasis added). It is therefore by molding the criteria of selection into status groups, as well as by providing the symbolic coordinates that differentiate lifestyles across the social landscape, that culture (and cultural goods) comes to be involved in the stratification process.

At the level of everyday experiential reality, status situations manifest mainly in individuals’ differential ability to acquire informal entry into symbolically (and sometimes spatially) delimited arenas of association. The primary role of these circles of acquaintance is to provide a sense of membership and to serve as sites of “sociability” (Simmel 1949), that is—as Simmel defined it—sites of social intercourse explicitly dissociated from direct instrumental pursuits. This is a characteristic form of association “which does not have a strictly economic or business purpose” (Weber 1994: 114). In contemporary post-traditional, market-dominated societies with very little “formal” apparatus of social
differentiation based on collectively defined “status orders” (Collins 1975), the primary way in which Weberian social honor is bestowed by members of one group to members of another is mainly through acceptance into informal networks of intimacy, friendship, and kinship (DiMaggio 1987).

After the analytical distinction between class and status has been made, the key question that emerges pertains to their relative causal priority. Most analysts agree with the general proposition that “[a] status situation can be the cause as well as the result of a class situation but it need be neither” (Weber 1946: 301). Accordingly, the relationship between class and status becomes a matter of empirical adjudication rather than a priori theoretical speculation. However, most American and European sociologists who theorize the culture–stratification link are not neutral on the question of whether status situations impact class situations. If some relation were not presumed to exist (especially going from status situation to class situation), it would diminish the warrant for being concerned with the culture–stratification link. The key question thus turns on specifying the concrete mechanisms through which status situations come to infiltrate or modify market-mediated systems for the determination of life-chances.

The emergence and reproduction of status cultures

Values, codes, and the emergence of status cultures

How do distinct class cultures emerge and reproduce themselves in post-traditional societies? Post-functionalist accounts of the culture–stratification link emphasize the crucial role of differences in socialization practices across status groups, which lead to the creation and intergenerational maintenance of distinct and sometimes antithetical values and conceptions of the world (Bourdieu 1984; Kohn 1989; Collins 1975; Lamont 1992).

These “status cultures” function as the primary conduit through which partially self-reproducing lifestyle groupings obtain whatever coherence they have in post-traditional societies (Giddens 1991). “Social structure” in post-traditional societies is best conceived as a loose tapestry of status groups and income classes—each endowed with different cultural and material endowments—competing to exercise hegemony over the centers of cultural authority and prestige (Bourdieu 1984; Collins 1975; Ollivier 2000).

Contemporary theorists are almost unanimous in suggesting that distinct status cultures originate through cultural transmission processes set within the domestic sphere. Status-based socialization not only serves to demarcate group boundaries, but has functional implications for the generation of status-linked advantages outside of the household. This can happen in several (interrelated) ways.

First, there is the question of the origins and consequences of different approaches to childrearing by members of different status cultures. It is clear that differences may emerge because, depending on status-group membership, parents may be endowed with different “images” of the world that serve as cognitive templates in guiding their socialization practices (Kohn 1989). These divergent cognitive and moral orientations are reinforced by the pervasive experiences and opportunities for expression of those cultural patterns that people encounter during day-to-day activity at work (Kohn 1989; Collins 1975; Coser 1975).

These cognitive-evaluative orientations can thus be reinforced intragenerationally through the life-course as persons come to settle on one or another line of work. They
are also reproduced intergenerationally through parental socialization practices, such that orientations play a key role in the status-reproduction process (Kohn 1989; Collins 1975; Goldthorpe 1996). For instance, members of culturally privileged status cultures come to place a heavy weight on the value of self-direction because it is reinforced in the white-collar workplace. In the very same way, members of routine white-collar and manual occupations come to weigh conformity positively because it is reinforced in the repetitive, low-autonomy work found in contemporary service establishments. This difference provides an explanation for the phenomenon of status-linked differences in work-values and career preferences (Kohn 1989).

Second, experience with a given status culture can come to define the way in which language is used inside and outside the home (Bernstein 1971, 1964). Differential acquisition of certain linguistic and cognitive skills in status-differentiated households links socialization practices set within the domestic arena with those competences that are rewarded in educational institutions. Children of middle-class parents are immersed in a distinct linguistic environment in the home, specifically in parents who belong to high-status occupations that presume difference and “spell everything out” directly, use a wider range of both syntactic and semantic resources (e.g. larger vocabulary, more complex syntax), and attempt to abstract out from both context and time.

Because school curricula are presented to students in a manner consistent with this status-differentiated style of linguistic encoding, pupils from middle-class backgrounds are able to more easily decode scholastic offerings as well as produce the specific styles of linguistic presentation favored by teachers, thus being more likely to be successful in academic environments, net of cognitive ability (Bernstein 1971). Members of high-status occupations are in this way more likely to provide their children with the linguistic and cognitive tools necessary to navigate social environments premised on encountering cultural diverse others (Bernstein 1964; Coser 1975).

**Status and organizational skills**

Status-linked parental socialization practices may serve to transmit cultural advantages not only directly (by rewarding those skills and value-orientations rewarded by educational institutions and high-status workplaces) but also indirectly, by providing children from privileged status backgrounds with a generalized competence for navigating complex bureaucratically organized institutions and effectively interacting with representatives of these organizations. It can thus be shown that the same formally organized environment (e.g. a school) can be used in a distinctive manner by parents and children of different class backgrounds, and that children of privileged status backgrounds are more likely to receive a “customized” experience (Lareau 2003).

Like other status-linked differences, inequalities in the ability to effectively navigate the institutions most likely to impact one’s life-chances can be magnified when parents of high-status occupations adopt a distinct (ideal-typically characterized) orientation towards childrearing, which provides children from these status groups with a host of intended and unintended cultural advantages.

For instance, Lareau (2003) has found that in structuring their child-socialization activities, high-status parents tend to rely on a logic of “concerted cultivation,” which involves the child’s constant participation in structured extra-curricular activities outside the home. Through these forms of social and cultural participation, middle-class children come to be endowed with a set of habitual social skills—such as the ability to treat adults
in positions of authority as (relative) equals, and to demand customized treatment from representatives of bureaucratic institutions—that allow them to more deftly navigate those institutions most clearly linked to life-chances, such as schools. Parents from lower occupational status groups adopt a very different posture toward childrearing, what Lareau (2003) calls the logic of “natural growth.” In this cultural script, the primary parental responsibility is to provide for the child’s basic needs (e.g. food, shelter, safety). Because the natural-growth strategy sees children talents as inherent in their person and as following an “Aristotelian” logic of spontaneous maturation and expression (rather than a “Lockean” logic of cultivation and learning), there is less perceived need for constant, competitive cultivation of special skills.

This means that children from lower-status backgrounds tend to spend more of their time among familiar same-age kin in unstructured domestic activities; their parents are unable to provide their children with the same opportunities to develop the same set of social skills as their high-status counterparts. When it comes to interacting with adults and professionals in positions of power in established institutions, these children are thus at a distinct interactional disadvantage. They lack the ability to demand that institutional regulations be tailored to their particular needs. For both white and black children of less privileged status backgrounds, schools are perceived as impersonal and removed from everyday concerns; they are sites of constraint and not arenas designed for personal growth (Lareau 2003).

Class habitus

Parental socialization practices does not only work at the level of value-orientations, the creation of future expectations, and “linguistic codes.” Socialization into a status-linked environment affects persons in a deeper manner, at the level of unconscious dispositions, skills, and practices (Bourdieu 1984). The implicit immersion in status-linked home environments is driven both by the child’s exposure to parental practices keyed to instruction and socialization, and by her active, bodily interaction with material objects and built environments, as well as her exposure to specific sensory experiences (Bourdieu 1990).

The acquisition of these tacit competences leads to the development of an unconscious, undirected (but ultimately systematically organized) set of expectations, styles of appreciation, schemes of perception, and systems of practical action in the world—what Bourdieu calls “habitus.” Habitus can be thought of as an enduring (but dynamic) cognitive structure that produces thoughts, reactions (aesthetic, cognitive, and moral), and choices (e.g. what to buy, what to major in, whom to marry) that are in tune with and attempts (within constraints) to recreate the environment in which it developed (Bourdieu 1990). This explains why we can recurrently observe individuals socialized within distinct status environments “constructing … positions for themselves … without awareness that they … [are] engaged in doing so” (Bettie 2003: 190).

Status cultures in post-traditional societies are thus recurrently generated and reproduced both within the household during the process of cultural socialization and outside the household in educational systems and the workplace. These status cultures fall into two general ideal-typical groups. The first is characterized by regularly occurring “interaction rituals” of high emotional intensity that are keyed to particularistic and concrete symbols of group membership (Collins 1975). The second is generated by way of membership in larger, loosely knit, more “cosmopolitan” networks with fuzzy boundaries which require more abstract and less context-specific forms of cultural
currency capable of generating emotionally weaker but wider-spanning forms of membership across different social arenas (Coser 1975).

Cross-cutting institutional linkages

Institutions, capital, fields

In addition to exploring the nexus that connects status-linked socialization practices with success in key institutional sites outside the home, culture and stratification researchers have examined how implicit institutional linkages across seemingly disconnected societal domains contribute to the stratification process (Bourdieu 1984, 1996). This type of analysis combines the Weberian insight about the partial autonomy of status situations (and their ability to sometimes drive class situations), the Marxian emphasis on power and cultural hegemony, and Durkheim’s concern with the social origins of shared systems of thought and classification. The key claim made by institutionally oriented theorists of the culture–stratification linkage is that status-based advantages (as produced within the family and in formal occupation-based class cultures) come to be inscribed in the very classificatory framework of the institutions in charge of sorting persons into positions that monopolize the extraction of Weberian class-based advantages and thus shape “life-chances.”

All of the major of institutions of post-traditional societies (e.g. education, science, art, the state) carry the “role imprint” (Bourdieu 1981; Burton and Beckman 2007) of the status-groups that were initially implicated in their emergence. It is therefore very difficult for social groups to achieve any type of “universal” (e.g. purely meritocratic) representation in, and access to, the institutions that determine life-chances that are not grounded in some delimited class culture. What can be shown is that different status groups compete for the claim to universal representation. This competition links to the process of status-group reproduction because, as we have seen, members of high-status occupational and professional fractions are able to impart those unofficial (and implicit) sets of habits, competences, mannerisms, and dispositions that provide their children with a probabilistic advantage of achieving success within dominant institutions. This circumstance partially guarantees some form of intergenerational transmission of the symbolic means of institutional authority and control, but also guarantees that this control will be subject to contestation (Bourdieu 1984).

This sensitizing framework carries with it major empirical implications. For instance, it should always be possible for the sociological analyst to empirically link even those fields of practice most apparently removed from status-group concerns (e.g. museums [Bourdieu and Darbel 1991]; research universities [Bourdieu 1996]) back to lifestyle-linked divisions in the wider social structure. This explains why we can observe robust cross-institutional linkages between fields that explicitly disavow being the instrument of status-group concerns (such as fields of cultural production and dissemination) and the audiences that incorporate the symbolic goods produced in those fields as a constitutive part of their lifestyle (Bourdieu 1984).

Cultural capital

The term cultural capital was first used in order to better understand patterns of inequality in educational outcomes in French schools—such as “educational inheritance”
or the differential ability of the sons and daughters of educated parents to be judged as
better students by their teachers (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). The concept of cultural
capital has nevertheless enjoyed much more flexibility in studies of the link between
culture and stratification. In studies of the social bases of cultural taste, the notion
of cultural capital has been generalized to explain differential rates of engagement in the
arts (Bourdieu 1968, 1984; DiMaggio 1987). A key argument here is that the dispositions
toward collectively validated symbolic goods function as cultural capital in post-
traditional societies, because it is the most institutionally legitimated (e.g. through its
reinforcement by educational institutions) form of appropriation of these goods (although
it is not the only existing basis of reception).

More contemporary studies have challenged the notion that cultural capital is inher-
ently linked to the arts or other forms of institutionalized “high culture.” Instead, the
empirical evidence shows that almost any set of status-based dispositions embodied by
members of a privileged status group counts as “capital” when deployed to produce
advantage in a concrete institutional setting. Thus, cultural aptitudes that facilitate the
appropriation of locally valued cultural goods or the ability to master those forms of
linguistic expression accorded the most value in the larger society—e.g. “idiomatic”
English (Carter 2003)—can be thought of as dominant cultural or linguistic capital when
they facilitate among the privileged classes particular styles of self-presentation perceived
(consiously or implicitly) by institutional gatekeepers to be markers of a superior
student, endowed with sophistication and intelligence (Bourdieu 1996: 31).

In the Anglo-American literature, two primary conceptualizations of cultural capital
inform contemporary theory and research on the culture–stratification linkage. One,
partially based on Bourdieu’s (1986) influential formulation, defines cultural capital as an
aptitude or a generalized, transposable (across contexts) skill acquired in the combined
realms of the upper-middle-class family and the school system (DiMaggio 1991: 134).
The other major conceptualization of cultural capital perceives ambiguities in the Bour-
dieuian-inspired definition of cultural capital as “skill” or “proficiency.” Instead, cultural
capital is viewed from a “boundaries” perspective, and defined as “the institutionalized
repertoire of high status signals” useful for purposes of marking and drawing symbolic
boundaries in a given social context (Lamont and Lareau 1988: 164). This definition
of cultural capital links to a Weberian theory of status-group closure; what counts as
cultural capital is those symbolic resources that are actively mobilized by members
of groups or class fractions to establish their difference from other groups and thus to
devalue the cultural resources and symbolic practices of outsiders.

The context-specificity of cultural capital

Rather than being in competition or mutually exclusive, both definitions of cultural
capital are empirically relevant and theoretically useful. This is because what “counts”
as cultural capital in a given interaction setting is often determined by the local institu-
tional context. For instance, minority youth from status-disadvantaged backgrounds can
gain interactional advantages from command of both (1) dominant cultural patterns
(institutionalized and associated with the “white middle class,” e.g. the ability to speak in
institutionally accepted ways)—cultural capital as competence—and (2) familiarity with
minority cultural patterns (“black” slang; a taste for certain musical and sartorial styles
associated with African-American oppositional youth cultures)—cultural capital as a
boundary-marking resource (Carter 2003). The former allows minority youth to navigate
their way through key institutions (schools, the workplace, the law), while the latter can be used to claim “authentic” membership in their ethnic subculture. Thus, cultural capital can be used not just as a boundary-drawing resource, but also as a way to claim ownership of desirable ethnic and racial identities. More importantly, precisely those youth who develop the ability to straddle the boundaries between dominant and non-dominant forms of cultural capital appear to reap the benefits of conventional success as well as acceptance by ethnic peers (Carter 2006).

Morals and manners

Contemporary research attempting to conceptualize the role of culture in marking divisions across status follows Weber and Bourdieu in keying in on the role of cultural aptitudes and lifestyle consumption patterns. However, this does not mean that taste and lifestyle are the only symbolic resources that serve to structure and mark the boundaries across status groups. As research demonstrates, certain moral ideologies may be as cognitively and affectively salient as tastes in serving as criteria for membership (and thus exclusion) from specific status-based collectivities (Lamont 1992, 2000; Sayer 2005).

For instance, boundaries based on moral qualities associated with socioeconomic pursuits tend to be more salient among culturally advantaged members of the American and French upper-middle class. Moral boundaries based on “honesty,” however, are particularly salient in the US, whereas those associated with taste and broader cultural orientations are more salient in the French context. In addition, judgments of the worth of members of different status fractions (e.g. those who belong to occupations closer to the market) made by members of culturally and economically distinct status fractions (culturally privileged but economically poor members of symbol-producing occupations) are structured by morally tinged conceptions of the propriety of profit-making versus dedication to more “transcendent,” less materialistic pursuits (Lamont 1992).

In addition, nationally and ethnically specific “institutionalized cultural repertoires” (Lamont 2000: 243) regulate boundary-drawing strategies among members of less privileged status groups (Lamont 2000), such as when working-class white men draw boundaries between the “morally worthy” working-class and the morally unscrupulous upper-middle class, or when boundaries are drawn laterally in order to exclude the putatively undeserving members of racial and ethnic groups of comparable socioeconomic status. It is impossible to understand these patterns of exclusion and inclusion and the role played by such key values as “hard work” or “honesty” in the discourse of the white working class (or the role of “caring” in the discourse of the black working class) without getting a handle of the distinct, context-specific cultural models deployed by different working-class fractions, both within a given national context (e.g. black versus white in the US) or across national societies (e.g. the relatively higher emphasis of the French working class on cross-racial solidarity based on trade unionism) (Lamont 2000).

Expanding the historical scope

The more institutionally oriented framework provided by cultural-capital theory has deeply affected Euro-American sociology (Savage et al. 2005). In particular, the concern with uncovering and delineating counterintuitive inter-institutional linkages connecting
status-based pursuits with processes of economic advancement and class-reproduction remains a key theme. Some of the best work extends this line of research by looking at the role of both moral and cultural boundaries as they play out in the constitution of status-group cultures across different historical periods. For instance, Beisel (1997) shows that attempts to impose specific forms of cultural hegemony on the part of competing fractions of the economic elite stand behind such seemingly disparate episodes as the panic over “obscene art” in late-nineteenth-century America or the panic over the “corrupting influence” of literary curricula on (middle-class) children in schools. The historical evidence shows that in those cities in which elite groups perceived the most threat from mobile parvenus and newly arrived immigrants, projects of moral reform proved to have much more support than in those cities where the upper class was comparatively shielded from threats to its status position (Beisel 1997).

One of the primary ways in which status groups continue to reproduce themselves in post-traditional societies is by providing persons with (apparently status-neutral, but demonstrably status-linked) cultural templates that come to govern spousal choice. The evidence shows that spousal choice is robustly impacted by status-linked factors, including the education and occupational position of each spouse and their relative familiarity with institutionally legitimated culture (Kalmijn 1991, 1994; DiMaggio and Mohr 1985).

Sociological studies of the history of the notion and practice of romance show an even more complicated tapestry of inter-institutional linkages uniting informal behavior in the “dating market” with processes of class and status-group reproduction (Illouz 1997). Modern notions of romance have been historically constituted through multiple cross-linkages between various institutional actors (the market, fields of cultural production, mental health). In this way, different conceptions of the “romantic” as forms of status culture become even more salient in determining status-based reproduction precisely at the point at which people experience themselves to be making the most autonomous of “choices”—whom to fall in love with. Preferences for a “soul-mate” are inseparable from other systems of preferences acquired and transmitted in the same sites dedicated to status-group reproduction, such as schools and the home (Bourdieu 1984). In this respect, homogamy based on status continues to be produced within a system dedicated to the discourse of love as an overwhelming (non-rational) emotional force or as an idiosyncratic (status-neutral) individual experience (Illouz 1997).

Problems and prospects in culture and stratification research

Contemporary analysts of the culture–stratification link have continued to develop the classical legacy by producing innovative lines of research. They have attempted to explore new dimensions of the culture and stratification links in two ways: “extensively,” in terms of historical nuance and scope, complexity, and the number of institutional linkages through which class cultures come to acquire hegemony over a given set of authoritative discourses; and “intensively,” in terms of uncovering process-based mechanisms through which status-based advantage is intergenerationally transmitted or produced and reproduced in concrete contexts. A lot of this work, even that which takes a more comparative approach (e.g. Lamont 1992, 2000), is centered on the Euro-American West, and is thus not as fully
geographically and cross-culturally representative as it could be (Kane 2003). Recent moves toward a more comparative approach to the study of “repertoires of evaluation” are a commendable way to radicalize the extensive strategy (Lamont and Thévenot 2000). Nevertheless, we still have very limited knowledge of how the relationship between status and class situations is manifested outside of the Euro-American context. Exceptions to this general claim include scholarship that explores the relationship between arts consumption and social stratification, a field of study that has experienced a very healthy expansion of late (Peterson 2005). This work has extended the “cultural-capital” framework for the study of lifestyle consumption patterns to Latin America and the transition economies of Russia and the former Soviet block (e.g. Zavisca 2005; Torche 2007).

We know even less about how cultural repertoires deployed for the demarcation of symbolic boundaries operate in non-Western developing countries. Outside of sociology, there is a vibrant and exponentially growing literature on cultural consumption and global media in anthropology and communications. In it, researchers make use of fundamental sociological insights on the relationship between status-based stratification and lifestyle. Some of this research indicates that the cultural-capital framework can certainly be used to understand the relative appeal of global versus local cultural products (Straubhaar 2007). For instance, in the case of Brazil, evidence shows that membership in distinct status fractions shapes media and other culture-consumption choices: members of culturally advantaged status groups gravitate towards “global” (English-language) culture and those endowed with less cultural capital prefer regional and local (“cultural proximate”) materials rendered in the national language. This work represents a good first step toward greater dialogue between scholars of globalization and scholars of culture and stratification.

It is clear that progress in the field requires both a continuation and a radicalization of extensive and intensive strategies. For the extensive strategy, it is important to examine the ever-changing and increasingly complex inter-institutional linkages through which status systems connect to class systems of rank both in contemporary “network” societies and during the transition to neoliberalism throughout the globe. Furthermore, it is important to begin to theorize the interstitial sites in which status-based cultural practices are beginning to become objectified and institutionalized (see, for instance, Illouz 2007 on “emotional capital”) so that we may continue to illuminate the sometimes surreptitious ways in which institutional logics based on delimited class cultures come to acquire society-wide cultural authority across and within contemporary contexts.

In terms of the intensive strategy, we need research designs that highlight the fine-grained processual mechanisms and processes responsible for the transmission of cultural resources within generations and across institutional sites (e.g. Carter 2003; Lareau 2003; Bettie 2003). We still know woefully little about the concrete realization and operation of the cultural and interactional mechanisms that generate status-based privilege and are therefore responsible for intergenerational transmission of cultural advantage. The intensive strategy may be harder to pursue than the extensive one but is equally essential. For only by having a clear handle on the micro-mechanisms and processes of status-based reproduction can we understand the origins of the apparently “natural gifts” that allow members of privileged status groups to more effectively navigate key institutional settings—settings that certify some cultural competencies as more legitimate than others and that therefore shape life-chances in post-traditional societies.
References


