

Less Theory. More Description.

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Abstract

Sociology must worry less about theoretical innovation and more about empirical description.

Keywords

science, theoretical concepts, empirical description, cultural capital

Sociologists often demand something of papers that appear in their leading journals: that they advance a theory of the world. This disposition makes sociology a more theory-driven than empirically driven discipline. And it raises several curiosities: if we constantly require new theoretical developments, what good is theory for understanding the world? What is the use of a particular theory if scholars are asked to make theory anew with every publication? How can sociologists adjudicate between theories that more or less accurately explain the social world when theoretical concepts are so easily made, used, and transformed?

We argue not only that most papers should not advance a new theory of the world but, further, that such demands for theoretical development impoverish the discipline both substantively and theoretically. We will show how theoretical concepts are emptied of their content fairly quickly to satisfy the requirements of advancing theory. This leads to theoretical concepts that are rarely useful beyond a particular case, and it creates cloudiness instead of clarity. We stake the position that a theoretically rich landscape, where theories are plentiful, is one wherein ideas are vacuous. Instead, we should aim for a descriptively rich discipline, where our theoretical frameworks are considerably less numerous and therefore more powerful. From our position, a theoretically rigorous discipline has fewer demands for theoretical innovation and more acceptance of empirical description for its own sake. In other words, we argue for less theory and more description.

We make our case using one theoretical concept: cultural capital. For decades, this concept has been highly used and reformulated. It has undoubtedly added to our understanding of how the social world works. Yet the ease with which it has been applied reveals considerable theoretical inconsistency. We briefly trace this problem back to the concept's inception

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and argue that it partially stems from the name, “capital.” This word connotes a fungibility similar to currency. Cultural capital can be leveraged to gain status—a process that may or may not be conscious on the part of an actor—but it cannot be traded like monetary currency. In other words, one does not lose her cultural capital when she leverages it for a more advantageous social position. Moreover, cultural capital is less extricable from its holder than is monetary currency. Different individuals cannot use the same knowledge in the same ways across situations; their social position determines what they can leverage and to what extent. Yet the theoretical proliferation of “cultural capital” has led scholars to run roughshod over such important insights. The concept is analytically vague at best, and it has not been applied consistently. Too often, authors ignore its relational nature and use the concept to describe any “cultural” variable’s effect on a given outcome. We suggest that this sloppiness is due, in large part, to editors’ and reviewers’ demands for making papers more theoretical. If most papers that use the concept of cultural capital are required to produce a theoretical amendment or reformulation, then the concept quickly becomes so expansive as to be meaningless (see Healy 2017). As the concept spreads, scholars become incapable of precisely stating what it is and it ends up depicting many things that are unrelated to or inconsistent with one another. Its increasingly theoretical “development” makes the concept decreasingly useful.

Scientific theory is an orientation in which scholastic communities are interested in additive empirical knowledge; this requires the consistent application of concepts and a limited range of abstracted generalizations. Such scientific theory is only one kind of theory. Some sociologists may wish the discipline were not a science. This is certainly an option, one that may allow for a less theoretically rigorous, but more theoretically populated, terrain. But such theory-heavy disciplines have difficulty advancing general understanding. For example, some areas of the humanities have a far more cluttered theoretical landscape than the social sciences, but they rarely use “theory” in a consistent and agreed upon manner. It is this proliferation of common theoretical terms, with little agreed upon referents (e.g., poststructuralism), that the relentless theory demands of our discipline push us toward.

If sociology chooses to position itself as a scientific discipline, it must abandon the inconsistent ways theoretical concepts are applied in sociological research. Such inconsistency makes it difficult to assess a “theoretical” contribution. This is not an argument against theoretical heterogeneity. Instead, to avoid this sociological wheel of fire—where concepts become less and less specific as they are applied to more and more disparate research projects—sociological research should use theoretical concepts in a more refined and consistent manner. We therefore seek fewer theoretical developments. We call for more precise and sparing usage of theoretical concepts, like cultural capital, and less emphasis on dressing up empirical findings as theoretical ones.

Our argument is related to Healy’s (2017) first and second “nuance traps,” in which empirical findings, by virtue of a theoretical requirement for publication, are given a gloss of theoretical productivity. Concepts thereby become bloated—in other words, rich and nuanced—and lack the possibility of being refuted. Muddling the meaning of concepts is bad for theory. Editors, reviewers, and the discipline writ large asking for more “nuance” reflect a demand for constant theoretical development. The consequence is perverse: less conceptual specificity and weak—if any—theorizing. New theories are necessary only when sufficient evidence demands them. Sociology can be a scientific—and theoretically rigorous—discipline only if its primary focus is not theoretical expansion but rather description.

CULTURAL CAPITAL

Cultural capital is a familiar concept to most sociologists, but there is little consensus on its definition. This is not because there are competing definitions—like for *class*, which

Weberians understand as a position within market relations but Marxians understand as a position within the relations of production. Instead, the operational definition of cultural capital is constantly reimagined and reconstructed within research projects. Cultural capital is a demonstrable understanding of a valued form of practice. Such a definition is so broad that it can refer to the possession of material objects, the display of tastes and dispositions, or formal credentials from institutions. The original formulation—from Bourdieu—defined cultural capital as “goods” transmitted to individual children through family practices that were more or less valued depending on how closely they matched the cultural practices deemed important by institutions like schools (see Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:30).

Subsequent reworkings by Bourdieu expanded the concept to include generalized understandings of valued forms of knowledge about cultural goods and symbols. This later definition specified cultural capital as a process or “an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code” (Bourdieu 1984:2). Cultural capital can thus refer to innumerable practices, for example, “table manners or the art of conversation, musical culture or the sense of propriety, playing tennis or pronunciation” (Bourdieu 1984:70), but practices can be identified as cultural capital only in their relationship to other practices that are more or less valued in a specific context.¹ The implication is that the logic of valuation—what makes a particular practice valuable in relation to other practices—is not universal and is, in fact, largely arbitrary.

The polysemy of the term in its originator’s writings yields many possible interpretations for scholars looking to examine the concept’s application to different areas of social life—perhaps one reason for the concept’s popularity. Yet the varying and broad definitions presented by Bourdieu in different texts also make for difficult theoretical commensuration of studies using the concept. Nearly 30 years ago, Lamont and Lareau (1988) bemoaned this vagueness in the pages of this journal, highlighting the multiple and often problematic uses of the concept. Their solution was to redefine, in a less encompassing way, what cultural capital meant: “institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion” (Lamont and Lareau 1988:156). Scholars might reasonably argue about whether this was a “good” reformulation, but we suggest that one cannot dispute the necessity for such definitional specificity. Lamont and Lareau did a kind of conceptual work that is good for sociological theory. But the discipline—despite a high number of citations of both Bourdieu’s original texts and Lamont and Lareau’s reworking—has failed to live up to the promises of either.

Lamont and Lareau (1988:160–61) note that many empirical studies using the concept—especially in the United States—abstract away from the micro politics that make cultural capital a process instead of just a set of attributes. Unfortunately, their call to refocus on power as exclusion remains largely unheeded outside of their research agendas. Recent publications using “cultural capital,” even ones that cite Lamont and Lareau, operationalize it as particular activities with little reference to any conflicts over the status of the activities themselves. The problem with the concept’s current usage and lack of content stems, in part, from the analogy that Bourdieu drew between cultural knowledge and economic capital. Bourdieu often writes of economic capital and cultural capital as if they are conceptually similar: If accrued, both bring power and status and they often correlate. For many readers, seeing the two concepts elaborated in the same way evokes a metaphor of exchange and quantification and, perhaps most problematically, the idea that the person holding either one does not affect its value.

Bourdieu himself certainly believed in the measurement of cultural capital. The survey on which many of the arguments in *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1984) are based asked direct questions about taste preferences (e.g., what subjects would make a beautiful photo, preferred

singers, enjoyed book genres) and consumption habits. Importantly, however, these questions were asked in conjunction with each other. Understanding cultural capital meant mapping various types of practices and relating them back to broader dynamics in the field of French society; namely, occupation and income. Measurability, in this sense, is different from quantification. Measurability simply requires value to be assigned relationally, whereas quantification implies that numerable units can describe an object. The distinction is important, and it has largely been lost when the concept of cultural capital is operationalized.

Let us consider a hypothetical study looking to measure cultural capital's effect on some outcome, "X." This type of question is not uncommon. Google Scholar searches for "does cultural capital matter for," "cultural capital affects," and "the effect of cultural capital on" each yield hundreds of results. Such a study presumes that cultural capital is quantifiable and also external to the individual. Both of these presumptions erase the concepts' relational nature. Early introductions into American sociology recognized that the concept described a transformational process by which certain knowledge, behaviors, or credentials are leveraged for advancement (DiMaggio and Useem 1978:154). Further usage and development (e.g., Blau 1986; DiMaggio 1982; DiMaggio and Mohr 1985) used the dominant framework and method of the time—status attainment and regression analysis—to show the effects of cultural capital. This pioneering work achieved three things. First, it made "cultural capital" an accessible term for U.S. scholars, removing it from correspondence analysis and integrating it into a more American-style analysis. Second, it demonstrated that the concept itself mattered—it was shown to produce effects in the world. Third, it fundamentally changed cultural capital into something that could be quantified as a variable, divorcing it from the relational content that was central to Bourdieu; hence Lamont and Lareau's subsequent reconceptualization.

Despite Lamont and Lareau's attempt, cultural capital became a wheel of fire, spiraling out of control in often unproductive ways. Suggesting it is something people "have" that can be measured as a variable that produces effects in the world makes the concept broadly applicable, but this prevents cultural capital from functioning as a conceptual framework through which it could be leveraged for advancement (see Lamont and Lareau 1988:163–4). This is to say, it becomes a widely available concept for many to use in different ways, because it has no real agreed upon meaning; it obscures mechanisms instead of uncovering them; and it allows for descriptive analyses to pose as theoretical advancement. In the case of cultural capital, theoretical innovation gradually expands the multiple meanings of the concept. As this happens, we become less and less able to actually evaluate theoretical propositions, and cultural capital becomes too expansive—a shorthand for many different kinds of phenomena. We have a position on which formation of the concept is "best," but let us be clear: the problem is not that one conceptualization is better than the other. The problem is that there are multiple, ever-expanding conceptualizations—made cloudier by constant demands for retheorization.

The simple understanding of cultural capital as being "like money in your wallet," where the currency is culture and not cash, is the direct result of this expansion of the concept (and the abandonment of the competing notions we see in Bourdieu, DiMaggio, and Lamont and Lareau). This makes the concept widely applicable but empty. It ignores a central difference between money and culture at the core of this concern. Economic capital has a somewhat unique quality compared with other kinds of capital: It is ambivalent to its holder. If Max has \$20 and Shamus has \$20, we can both purchase equivalent objects within markets. We may choose different things. But, were we to choose the same good, in almost all cases, we would be able to purchase equivalent amounts of that good.²

We cannot say the same about cultural capital; this is a difference that makes a difference. The reception of individuals' cultural displays are highly influenced by their position. Let us

take two examples. Imagine, for a moment, that two people know the exact same amount about baseball as one another. They similarly “embody” their baseball knowledge, wearing hats of their favorite team, participating in fantasy leagues with similar enthusiasm, and making pilgrimages to classic ballparks. They use their association with baseball to draw boundaries that are important to them and to gain power and status in their lives in the same ways. Given the money analogy, their cultural association with baseball should produce similar effects on their overall life chances. But imagine that one of these people is a man and the other is a woman. Suddenly the value of their cultural capital is different. Not because of any difference in cultural capital *per se* but because of the status of its holder. A broader cultural division of interest in sports by gender means that any particular attempt to leverage such knowledge (cultural capital) must be understood as a gendered process (Messner 1995). Such knowledge is therefore inextricably linked to its source (Bourdieu 1998).

Or imagine two people who have equivalent knowledge of classical music, enjoy it similarly, and participate in concerts and playing in similar ways. If cultural capital were fungible, these two would enjoy similar outcomes (and even power) from deploying their capital. But imagine one of these people is Asian and the other is Black. We might ask: What is the likelihood that people observing the woman sports fan would “reward” her in similar ways to the man? Or that the classical musical knowledge of a Black person and an Asian person would be similarly received? (We might reverse this and ask who would have greater authority over hip-hop.) The implications of this point are multiple—individuals’ differential investments in cultural traits may well be strategic actions oriented to the relative values those traits have for the holder. Put differently, it might make less sense for Black Americans to “invest” in cultural tastes and dispositions around, say, classical music, because such investments have a lower yield than others (see Khan 2011). Outlining the full extent of these implications is beyond the scope of our short essay. The key lesson is that culture, unlike cash, is not fungible. And this is of central importance.

Cultural capital has been useful for sociologists in part because of its ambiguity and in part because of its spiraling expansiveness. It is amenable to the relentless demands for theoretical expansion (and inconsistency). As such, “culture” most generally, and “cultural capital” more specifically, have become a theoretically rich yet vacuous terrain. We believe it would be more accurate and theoretically helpful for reviewers of papers that use a cultural independent variable (e.g., educational credential, knowledge of art) to not require retheorizing or even necessarily engagement with the concept of cultural capital. It should be perfectly acceptable to write papers that measure a cultural independent variable’s effects on some outcome without claiming to measure cultural capital *per se*. This brings us to our broader recommendations for sociology and sociological theorizing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We need to demand less theory in sociology so that the theories we have can do more. Competing theories of explanation exist in most disciplines, and sociology, too, is theoretically heterodox, describing and analyzing the social world through a diverse set of lenses. Perhaps because of the discipline’s acceptance of multiple types of theory, it is largely expected that contributions be “theoretical” (Abend 2008). That is, journal articles should advance a theory of their subject. Authors are often critiqued for their framing or asked to rework theoretical concepts at the expense of evidentiary and methodological challenges (Strang and Siler 2015). This emphasis on the interpretive, or theoretical reworking, is a mistake; fewer papers should be asked to develop novel theoretical insights. The discipline should be more open to processes of description and evaluation without retheorization.

We have four broad and related recommendations to solve this problem. First, editors and reviewers should require less theory. When judging manuscripts for publication, we should not force papers to be more theoretical by reformulating existing theoretical concepts. If the descriptive data presented are novel and reveal something new about the social world, we should be more than happy to add the work to our disciplinary knowledge and consider it a contribution. There is no inherent need to turn every paper into a test of a theoretical concept or, even worse, a reformulation of a concept.

This is not to say that theoretical concepts should be frozen at the point of inception; this brings us to our second and third recommendations. Second, the discipline needs more policing of theory and theoretical concepts. More pieces that seek to clarify concepts (e.g., Lamont and Lareau 1988) should be welcome in theory journals. This does not mean exegesis for its own sake but, instead, taking stock of the ways a particular concept has been used and determining whether such usages are first, accurate, and second, productive. Editors and reviewers not only should require less theory: they should also require better theory. When authors purport to use a theoretical concept, editors and reviewers should ask not only whether the concept is appropriate for the data but whether it is even necessary. Third, those of us who seek to create new theories should provide roadmaps for how our ideas can be tested and verified. It is an understandable impulse to want our theoretical concepts to be expansive; such broadness leads to more engagement. We are not against broadness—except for its own sake—but too few theorists articulate the limits of their concepts, and even fewer provide appropriate ways to test their claims.

Fourth, sociology should identify more specifically as a science and demand that the vast majority of research be purely descriptive; science, after all, is largely the generation of novel empirical findings. An ideal scientific discipline might be envisioned as a pyramid, built on a firm basis of description, with a smaller amount of reevaluation, and even less theorization. Yet sociology too often reverses this pyramid. Sociology is a theoretically demanding discipline that, because of its constant demands for theorization, is theoretically impoverished.

We need to understand the world better. It is not foolish to imagine we need more concepts to help classify our understanding. Yet somewhat counterintuitively, we need the exact opposite. What we need are findings. We need editors who are willing to publish descriptively rich, findings-driven papers; reviewers who are happy to support findings that are rigorously generated; and a discipline that realizes the development of theory happens not when concepts are highly cited but instead when they are clearly specified. Less theory. More description.

NOTES

1. It is important to remember that the concept of cultural capital itself, according to Bourdieu, is useful only in relation to his concept of “field” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:16). In other words, the process by which certain practices are valued occurs within certain social spaces that have internal logics.
2. Discrimination can and does, of course, affect these processes. Women and racial-ethnic minorities pay more for cars; poor people pay more for financial services; and residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods are limited in their capacity to transact in the market (Besbris et al. 2015; Pager and Shepherd 2008). However, in the vast majority of cases in market economies—as opposed to bartering—monetary currency is ambivalent to its holder (on the nonfungibility of currency, however, see Zelizer 1994).

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