

**Discuss in what ways does one's habitus and  
cultural capital affect the relationship  
between schooling and work?**

Word Count: 827

Ari Najarian – B00201304  
SOSA-3175  
December 1, 2005  
Dr. Marianne Parsons

One of the most common arguments in defence of status-quo arrangements regarding education in Canadian society is the myth of meritocracy. By claiming that it is possible to achieve any desired status, regardless of one's socio-economic, cultural or ideological position within the society, apologists have managed to craft an ideology of "free will" that socially reproduces the privileges already enjoyed by certain groups in Canada. The argument for free will asserts that individuals are autonomous and possess the ability to choose their lot from an unlimited list of outcomes. Though this position may hold under ideal circumstances, post-structural and post-modern investigations appear to indicate the contrary: what may ostensibly appear to be unlimited election is actually constrained by a host of social factors. Theorists working independently of educational research have developed the notions of "habitus" and "cultural capital" that describe the social factors that come to bear on personal decisions made by cultural actors. When applied to the sphere of education, these notions help us uncover a continuous link between schooling and work that calls into question the ideals of meritocracy. I propose that students' habitus and cultural capital in fact constrict their perceptions of schooling, consequently limiting their vocational possibilities beyond education. The connection between schooling and work thus becomes one of social reproduction, rather than upward mobility.

The two concepts at the heart of this argument describe two distinct groups of social factors that influence the choices students (are able to) make about their futures. Cultural capital describes the set of values, attitudes and ideals that a student-qua-cultural actor needs in order to succeed socially. Just like economic, social or political capital, cultural capital can be seen as a resource tied to one's class within a society. However, unlike economic capital, one accumulates cultural capital only through the process of acculturation, or the set of experiences by which one acquires one's system of values and beliefs. But this set of experiences in turn

depends largely on factors such as social class, ethnic background, religion, etc. that together describe one's social identity. This means that, just as with economic capital, cultural "class" is transmitted through privilege: the privilege of being exposed to that set of experiences that acculturates one to succeed.

Constructed in this manner, a student's success can be measured by the extent to which their cultural "resources" approximate real cultural capital. Consider, for example, the student that chooses to fill their high-school transcript with arts and humanities courses versus the student who focuses on science and technology. The former ascribes value to subject matter that many employers dismiss, consequently putting himself or herself at a disadvantage upon graduation. The values and beliefs that students possess based on their social experiences are legitimated only insofar as they mirror those values and beliefs of the culturally privileged; this hardly supports the equitable ideals of meritocracy and free will.

Habitus, on the other hand, refers to the set of dispositions that describe the behaviour of any given social actor. This concept challenges the notion of free will: whereas ontologically, there may exist limitless choices in any given scenario, in practice many of these choices simply do not present themselves or occur to an individual. One's habitus prefigures the subset of responses that are perceived as viable. Thus an illiterate lower-class child living in the United States would never think of becoming an ambassador to the U.N., even though the ontological possibility exists.

In some capacity, there is a dependent relationship between one's habitus and one's cultural capital: a culturally underprivileged individual will generally be predisposed to socially reproduce underprivileged circumstances by making decisions in line with an underprivileged habitus. In the realm of schooling, this habitus may manifest in the decision to pursue a general or vocational stream rather than aspire to the academic stream; it will also put post-secondary studies outside the realm of

possibility for a large number of students whose backgrounds have categorically excluded university education. The habitus a student from an academically-minded family acquires predisposes him or her to pursue a post-secondary education; a working-class student whose parents struggle to put food on the table is predisposed to forego post-secondary studies to help make ends meet. Again, this challenges the meritocratic free-will stance directly.

We have seen how cultural capital and habitus reveal the social factors that describe the connection between schooling and work. While apologists of the status quo might try to portray the school system as the "great leveller" and the bastion of upward mobility, it is far more likely that students' cultural resources and predispositions will compel them to reproduce the social inequalities they face in society through their schooling and, by extension, their working life. Habitus and cultural capital, then, establish an almost causal relationship between schooling and work. Unless the education system takes an active acculturating role - directly influence one's values and predispositions - the circumstances of privilege and inequality will continue to be passively reproduced indefinitely.