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Is Social Reproduction a Useful Theoretical Lens for Understanding the Relationship Between Education and Career Destinations?

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Abstract: This paper explores the relationship between education and career destinations through the lens of social reproduction theory. Rooted in Marxist thought, social reproduction highlights how social inequalities are perpetuated across generations, particularly through education systems and labour markets. Drawing on studies from both the UK and the US, the paper critically examines how social and cultural capital influence individuals' educational outcomes and career opportunities. It demonstrates how middle-class families leverage networks and cultural resources to secure advantageous positions for their children. The analysis extends beyond class to incorporate gender, race, and ethnicity as critical, intersecting factors. Gendered expectations influence subject choices, work-family balance, and earnings, while race and ethnicity shape access to educational support, employment networks, and job market outcomes — often through mechanisms like racial penalties and white privilege. The paper underscores that while social reproduction is a powerful tool for understanding these dynamics, it must be considered alongside other social dimensions. Ultimately, the paper concludes that the relationship between education and career destinations is shaped by the intersecting effects of class, gender, race, and ethnicity.

Keywords: Social reproduction; Cultural capital; Social capital; Educational inequality; Career destinations

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1. Introduction

In today's society, the relationship between education and career destinations forms a bridge that shapes both individual trajectories and social structures. Social reproduction theory reveals how social inequalities are transmitted across generations through the education system and labour market. Drawing on various studies from the US and UK, this essay employs social reproduction as a theoretical lens to examine the connections between education and career destinations. Furthermore, by incorporating cases from both countries, this essay may be applicable in a broader context.

Firstly, the essay will critically analyse social reproduction as a useful theoretical lens for understanding the relationship between education and career destinations. This analysis will draw on two key concepts: social capital and cultural capital. The study will then introduce three additional factors that contribute to this relationship: gender, race, and ethnicity. When exploring the relationship between education and career destinations, it is essential to consider how these three factors interact with social reproduction.

2. Social reproduction as a useful theoretical lens

The Marxist understanding of social reproduction involves both the renewal of the labour force and the preservation of class relations. It views this process not only from the perspective of individual workers or firms but also from the broader context of maintaining capitalist structures in society [1]. Marx emphasised how culture and customs — referred to as the "superstructure" — play a significant role in either facilitating or impeding social continuity. This superstructure is connected to the economic forces and relations of production, known as the "base", which both shape and are shaped by the superstructure.

Morrow and Torres argued that seemingly "innocent" yet problematic educational policies and practices — such as market-driven school choice, curriculum reforms, accountability measures, and student enrolment rules — play a role in perpetuating forms of domination and inequality [2]. Moreover, Walker asserted that the education system mirrors the workplace in an economic-reproductive model, revealing structural processes within schooling that contribute to social reproduction [3].

2.1. Social capital

The perpetuation of social inequality from one generation remains a persistent issue. Social capital, as a resource unequally distributed across social groups, plays a significant role in this phenomenon. Scholars like James Coleman and Pierre Bourdieu are associated with this perspective. Bourdieu defined social capital as the resources individuals can access through their social networks and connections, encompassing information, support, cooperation, and various forms of assistance that can be activated within social relationships [4]. He also highlighted social capital's tendency to favour those already in privileged positions. Bourdieu argued that individuals from higher social classes often possess more extensive and influential social networks, providing them with greater access to valuable resources [4].

Coleman linked social capital to educational outcomes, emphasising the importance of "closure", or the mutual nature of relationships [5]. In education, a specific form of closure is "intergenerational closure", where children benefit from their families' social capital. Horvat et al. also discussed intergenerational closure, suggesting that social capital is built through parental networks — particularly those of middle-class families — throughout a child's life [6].

More specifically, families with greater social capital can significantly aid their children in successfully completing their education. According to Baker and Stevenson, middle-class parents in the US pass down their social networks to their children, distinguishing them from the working class [7]. These parents actively manage their children's education by investing resources, applying their understanding of the education system, and making informed decisions about educational choices. A similar pattern is observed in the UK, as seen in Ball et al.'s study, which explored how parents with more social capital play a key role in shaping their children's educational choices [8]. Under policies that allow parental school choice, parents assume the role of strategists, with

the primary goal of securing the best possible outcomes for their children. Ball suggested that middle-class parents with social capital have access to a wider array of strategic options, gaining additional insights about schools through their social networks [9]. Consequently, these parents may choose schools based on a broader range of information sources, such as the school's reputation and educational practices. In conclusion, when children are born into families with greater social capital, their parents can significantly influence their ability to make well-informed educational choices.

Furthermore, family-based social capital also influences how easily children can secure employment. Specifically, parents with greater social capital can provide their children with an advantage in the job market through referrals. Brown et al. conducted a study comparing outcomes between referred and non-referred workers in the US, examining the likelihood of being hired, initial wages, and turnover rates [10]. They found that referred workers are more likely to be hired, and those hired through referrals enjoy higher starting wages and lower turnover rates during their initial three years of employment. It is important to note that these advantages from referrals may primarily benefit individuals within the same network. Consequently, as the hiring process increasingly favours candidates who are referred, individuals outside these networks may face disadvantages. Therefore, children with more family social capital are more likely to secure employment through referrals, thus contributing to inequalities in the job market between themselves and those lacking family social capital.

2.2. Cultural capital

Moreover, social inequality is also perpetuated through cultural reproduction. Bourdieu defined cultural reproduction as the transmission of general cultural background, knowledge, dispositions, and skills from one generation to the next [4]. The connection between social reproduction and cultural reproduction is symbiotic, as the perpetuation of societal structures (social reproduction) is closely intertwined with the transmission and preservation of cultural elements, as suggested by Bourdieu (cultural reproduction).

Cultural capital, as proposed by Bourdieu, provides a useful concept for analysis [4]. There are three key arguments related to cultural capital. Firstly, individuals from different class backgrounds inherit distinct cultural capital. Secondly, schools tend to favour the cultural capital of the dominant class, systematically devaluing that of the lower class. Upper-class students, for instance, gain linguistic and cultural competence through homeschooling, providing them with the tools for success in formal education and converting academic achievement into economic wealth [11]. Lastly, children who engage in activities like reading books, visiting museums, attending concerts, and experiencing various cultural events acquire familiarity with the dominant culture, which the education system implicitly requires for academic achievement [4].

Cultural capital is a multifaceted asset encompassing 'embodied, objectified, and institutionalised' forms [4]. Embodied cultural capital includes elements like accent, dialect, and posture, while objectified capital consists of material possessions with cultural significance. Institutionalised forms involve formal education degrees, identified by Bourdieu as crucial [4]. Bourdieu suggested that formal education perpetuates social inequality through symbolic violence, a means by which dominant beliefs are imposed to maintain power relations [12]. This process, distinct from physical force, covertly influences consensus, favouring a specific social group's interests. Educational institutions tend to favour the cultural assets associated with the dominant social class while consistently undervaluing the cultural assets of the lower class. Therefore, symbolic violence, according to Bourdieu, aids in cultural reproduction and transmission of cultural capital, contributing to social inequality [13].

Moreover, MacLeod suggested that under the guise of "meritocracy", academic success is often perceived

as the outcome of personal abilities rather than being truly connected to merit [14]. Thus, social reproduction at school is implicit, making it difficult to detect. Instead of considering personal abilities, Bourdieu and Passeron suggested that the success or failure of the school depends primarily on social class [15]. This means that children from high-class families with more cultural capital naturally adapt better to schooling and are rated higher. As a result, schooling does not change the gap in cultural capital that exists between the different class families that the students themselves come from, but instead further strengthens inequality. As Bourdieu suggested, schooling entrenches social inequalities by reproducing class privilege and simultaneously sanctifying the inequalities that result [16]. In particular, educational qualifications serve as a key mechanism for reproducing social inequalities by shaping individuals' tastes and preferences in ways that reinforce existing power structures.

To understand the relationship between education and career destinations using cultural capital, Bowles and Gintis emphasised that the disparities between schools lead to varied employment prospects for families with different levels of cultural capital [17]. They highlight distinct structural differences among schools in the US. Schools serving working-class children, with less cultural capital, tend to be more regimented, focusing on rules and behavioural control, ultimately preparing them for lower-status jobs. In contrast, middle-class children with more cultural capital are encouraged to learn at their own pace, operate independently, and internalise social norms, preparing them for leadership roles rather than subordinate positions. Similar findings can be seen in the UK, as Bourdieu pointed out, the inheritance of cultural capital based on different class origins [4]. Certain professions have specific codes of conduct, unwritten rules, and insider knowledge that might not be explicitly taught in educational institutions; cultural capital equips individuals to comprehend and navigate these professional norms.

Friedman and Laurison used the UK Labour Force Survey to provide an extensive analysis of social mobility [18]. Their research revealed substantial differences between various occupational groups, particularly within the medical profession. A limited percentage (7%) of doctors come from working-class backgrounds with less cultural capital, while a significant majority (80%) come from privileged backgrounds. Furthermore, individuals from working-class backgrounds face challenges in accessing the UK's top professions, experiencing a substantial "class pay gap" at both senior and junior levels, even when controlling for educational attainment [18]. While education does play a partial equalising role when considering a person's educational achievements, it is crucial to note that private schooling is strongly associated with class origins and cultural capital [19].

In summary, cultural capital plays a crucial role in maintaining social inequality. Schools tend to favour children with more cultural capital, preparing those from upper-class backgrounds for top economic positions. Simultaneously, this process conditions lower-class individuals to accept their more modest status in the societal hierarchy.

3. Other factors to understand the relationship between education and career destinations

Whilst social reproduction plays an important role in examining the relationship between education and career destinations, it is equally important to consider gender, race, and ethnicity, as these factors also have significant impacts on education and career outcomes.

3.1. Gender

Firstly, gender plays a significant role in shaping students' programme choices, leading to variations in enrolment patterns across different specialisations. Zafar pointed out that boys often show a preference for subjects like mathematics, physical sciences, and information technology, while girls frequently choose the humanities and

biological sciences in the US [20]. However, Ma argued that girls from lower socio-economic status backgrounds are just as likely as boys to choose a lucrative university programme [21]. However, for students from higher socio-economic backgrounds, gender differences persist: female students favour social sciences and humanities subjects, while male students favour business and health subjects in the US.

Saeed highlighted a significant gender disparity, indicating fewer opportunities for girls to enter engineering programmes compared to boys in the UK [22]. This imbalance can potentially lead to lower earnings for girls due to the higher income associated with science and engineering fields. Saeed's study further indicates that even after adjusting for factors such as family background, institution type, major, academic performance, and job placement, male graduates consistently receive higher pay than their female peers, regardless of their chosen speciality. Consequently, many female graduates choose to pursue advanced degrees to enhance their future job competitiveness. This trend contributes to the current higher educational attainment of girls compared to boys.

Concerning career destinations, it is essential to examine the division of paid and unpaid work within households. Sayer highlighted that in the US, when women become mothers, societal expectations often position them as primary caregivers rather than primary earners [23]. This anticipation of involvement in housework and childcare can adversely impact the career choices, aspirations, and plans of young women [24]. Mothers dedicate significant time and energy to caring for their children, limiting their opportunities to pursue paid work. Moreover, Coltrane suggested that men's engagement in parenting activities can lead employers to question their commitment and dedication to paid work in the US [25]. Consequently, persistent perceptions of paternalism discourage men from investing more time in unpaid work, contributing to societal inequalities between men and women in both paid and unpaid roles.

Similarly, in the UK, Platt noted that women's educational qualifications may not translate into higher-level occupational positions as they do for men [26]. Women entering the paid labour market are more likely to assume childcare responsibilities, and the constraints of family duties often force them into part-time or lower-paid jobs. Hence, gender should be a focal point in discussions about the relationship between education and career destinations.

Nevertheless, it is not enough to understand the relationship between education and career destinations in terms of gender alone. Gender issues and social reproduction are mutually reinforcing, as societal norms and structures related to gender roles play a significant role in the ongoing process of reproducing social inequalities. According to DiMaggio's study, there are significant disparities in the impact of cultural capital on men and women [27]. Cultural capital has the most profound effect on the education and career destinations of daughters with college-educated fathers in the US. Cultural capital seems integral to the identity of academically successful middle-class girls. In a world where men dominate careers and control material rewards, women feel a greater need to distinguish themselves through the cultural marketplace.

Elder noted that men from higher-class backgrounds use elite culture as an alternative platform for achievement [28]. However, unlike men with high cultural capital striving for workplace success, women with more cultural capital see their academic achievements as qualifying them to be partners with middle-class men. When discussing the relationship between education and career destinations, considering social reproduction and gender together reveals that women from middle-class backgrounds with higher-educated parents use their degree as a criterion for becoming the partners of middle-class men, rather than for success in the labour market. Therefore, considering both factors together provides a more holistic approach to exploring the relationship.

3.2. Race

Apart from gender, race also plays a significant role in shaping the connection between education and career destinations. For example, Royster's study revealed disparities in the support provided by white male teachers to black and white males in the US [29]. The study noted that these teachers offered verbal encouragement to black students but were more actively involved in assisting white students, providing them with information about job vacancies, referrals, and direct recruitment. Furthermore, crucial employment information and assistance in public school settings are racially privatised, with white male teachers establishing a parallel transition system that benefits white students more than their black counterparts.

Furthermore, some scholars refer to "racial penalties" in the workplace. Heath and McMahon defined "racial penalties" as forms of discrimination related to employment, encompassing factors that lead a racial group to underperform in the labour market compared to similarly qualified white individuals [30]. Royster presented two arguments for racial disadvantages in US workplaces [29]. One argument suggests that vulnerability in the job market for black individuals is due to fewer desirable work-related cultural practices, making them less attractive to employers. The other suggests implicit differences in the labour market skills possessed by white and black people with similar diplomas, emphasising the perceived inferior skill sets of black individuals. Both perspectives highlight the racial deficit as the cause of black unemployment, framing it as a result of racial perceptions rather than structural inequalities.

Royster's findings reveal that for white males, factors like youth, inexperience, immaturity, and indiscipline do not come at a great cost. However, black men often struggle to remain in the trades they initially learned and are less likely than white men to transition between trades. Once leaving skilled trades, black men tend to enter low-skilled service industries, such as retail or food service. Furthermore, despite achieving similar academic qualifications as white individuals, many occupations maintain an elite status by preserving white identity and privilege, resulting in a higher likelihood of unemployment and low-skilled jobs for black individuals. Thus, race might be a vital factor in discussions about the relationship between education and career destinations.

However, it is also beneficial to understand the relationship by discussing social reproduction and race together. Cancio et al. pointed out that the correlation between test scores and class background suggests that differences observed between black and white individuals on standardised achievement tests reflect class background factors rather than the independent influence of race in the US [31]. Furthermore, Liu et al. discovered the close relationship between social class and race in shaping people's education and career destinations [32]. They suggested that white middle-class privilege is closely related to self-agency. If they expect to be treated fairly in the work environment, white middle-class people may reflect their ability to "get what they want." Conversely, people of lower social class may expect failure in the same circumstances. Liu et al.'s study further pointed out that white middle-class privilege can be reflected by the lack of consequences for behaviours such as alcoholism [32]. They used a case study to illustrate that white middle-class children do not have to worry about their careers and grades at graduation, creating a sense of invulnerability in the white middle class.

3.3. Ethnicity

In addition, ethnicity is also a crucial factor in understanding the relationship between education and career destinations. Bhopal's research indicated that while students from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds are increasingly enrolling in higher education in the UK, they are less likely to graduate with a 2:1 or first-class degree [33]. Furthermore, Bhopal's study found that BME students, with similar qualifications to their white peers,

are more likely to be unemployed six months after graduation, with lower earnings in the UK.

However, a more holistic understanding of the relationship can be achieved by considering both ethnicity and social reproduction together. Catney and Sabater found that individuals from ethnic minority groups and low socio-economic backgrounds in the UK are less likely to attend prestigious universities or hold higher-status public office later in life [34]. Furthermore, Li and Heath used aggregated data from nationally representative British surveys conducted between 1982 and 2011 [35]. The inclusion of all major "visible" ethnic minority groups allowed for a much finer-grained analysis than previous studies. Their research found that the strength of the association between first-generation ethnic minority males competing with white males for advantaged class status and avoiding disadvantaged class status remained fairly similar over the first three decades. However, for second-generation males, there was a clear and significant decline in the strength of the association between ethnicity and class affiliation. Therefore, when scholars explore the relationship between education and career destinations, they should consider both social reproduction and ethnicity.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, social reproduction provides a valuable theoretical lens for understanding the relationship between education and career destinations. It offers important insights into the perpetuation of social inequalities, emphasising how socio-economic structures are transmitted across generations, influencing educational opportunities and subsequently shaping career outcomes. However, it is crucial to recognise the limitations of this perspective, as other factors, such as gender, race, and ethnicity, also play significant roles in this relationship. Ultimately, the connection between education and career destinations cannot be fully understood through social reproduction alone but must also consider its intersection with these additional factors.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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