

## **SOCIAL CAPITAL AND OPEN DISTANCE E-LEARNING: A BOURDIEUSIAN AND MARXIAN DISCOURSE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

A growing number of social scientists have invoked the idea of social capital in the search for answers to a broadening range of questions being confronted in the wide range of social science disciplines. With this in mind, this article explores the use of social capital as theoretical lens in understanding Open Distance e-Learning (ODEL) from a Bourdieusian and Marxian perspective. We depart from the assumption that concepts of social capital, ODeL, educational outcomes and throughput rate are intimately connected. We argue that the dynamics of social capital in ODeL are not only influencing students but are also capable of changing the structure of educational outcomes, high throughput rate and social reproduction.

**Keywords:** social capital, OdeL, social reproduction, linguistic construct, capitalist hegemony.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The concept of “social capital” has been around for at least a century, and has become increasingly popular in a wide range of social science disciplines. As Field (2008) writes, “social capital is a way of defining the intangible resources of community, shared *values* and *trust* upon which we draw in daily life”. From a sociological perspective, among others, social capital is not possessed by individuals, but resides in the relationships individuals have with one another (Lin, 2001; Lorenzen, 2007); and fosters reciprocity, coordination, communication and collaboration (Bourdieu, 1986, 1987). Yet, social capital has become a key concept in academic theories and research, and dominant as a paradigm for guiding policy-making that seeks to shape everyday practices in relation to building social integration. Portes (2000:1) observes that social capital is “arguably one of the most successful “exports” from sociology to other social sciences and to public discourse during the last two decades.

Perhaps, it is worth mentioning that the significance in social capital has since expanded to other areas including higher education, economics, computer science, business, organizational studies, and health. Social capital, as Kawachi (2008:15) puts it, is a macroeconomic term recently embraced by the World Bank and others as an indicator of the effectiveness and measure of the outcomes of various interventional policies. Furthermore, it has been linked with proactive participation in education and with lifelong learning. For example, Adler and Kwon (2002:17) note that a growing number of sociologists, political scientists, and economists have invoked the concept of social capital in the search for answers to a broadening range of questions being confronted in their own fields. Most importantly, Sunderland (2007) highlights that “researchers have linked high levels of social capital with improved economic performance, better educational outcomes, low crime rates, increased judicial efficiency, more effective government, social peace and a healthier population.”

With this background in mind, we problematise social capital in the open distance e-learning (ODEL) context. Notwithstanding the fact that ODeL remains a *capitalist/dominant* class issue, both in the developing and under developed countries, we depart from the Marxian and Bourdieusian stance acknowledging that high levels of social capital within ODeL framework, has a potential of contributing to better educational outcomes and high throughput rate. For us, concepts of social capital, ODeL, educational outcomes and throughput rate are intimately connected. However, the dynamics of social capital, as a conceptual tool, in ODeL are not only influencing students but are also capable of changing the structure of educational outcomes and high throughput rate. In our opinion, rural communities in the developing world are at crossroads. We maintain that students in developed regions with deep quality education and affluent social capital can mean connections that enable upward mobility for both individual and community development, while in poor undeveloped regions, social capital might lead to social division and worse inequity. In this article, we invoke Bourdieusian social capital in the search for answers to a broadening range of questions being confronted in the ODeL field, more specifically on the challenges and politics of access. We begin by defining the concept more precisely and by articulating a conceptual frame-work for our integration. Secondly, we sketch Bourdieu's social capital as ontology, truth and method. Thirdly, we present social capital as a power relation construct. Lastly, we critique ODeL through Bourdieu's and Marx's lens of social capital.

## CONCEPTUALISING SOCIAL CAPITAL

Let us begin by accepting that there are a number of different conceptualisations of "social capital". However, to comprehend social capital, it is imperative to elucidate the notion of *capital*. In economic thought, the term *capital* originally meant an accumulated sum of money, which could be invested in the hope of a profitable return in the future (Field 2008: 14). According to Lin (2001:4), the notion of capital can be traced back to Karl Marx, Max Weber, Adam Smith and Émile Durkheim in their analysis of how capital emerges from social relations between the bourgeoisie (capitalists) and labourers in the processes of commodity production and consumption. Marx, like many writers, saw capital as part of the surplus value (created through the processes of commodities production and exchange) that creates further profit (Lin 2001:4). For him, capital as a *social idea* and *social power* is intimately associated with the production and exchange of commodities (p. 7); and a process and an end result that lies by definition in the hands of those who control the means of production. The means of production create and accumulate in the form of capital. Capital, in turn, consolidates control over production means (Lin, 2001).

The word social capital is philosophically heavily burdened with heritage of contradicting usages and of inconclusive and interminable discussion. The concept social capital is supposed to have first appeared in Lydia Judson Hanifan's discussions of rural school community centres around 1920. It is also attributed to the works of Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman and Robert Putnam. Hanifan used the term to describe "those tangible substances [that] count for most in the daily lives of people". Yet, in recent years the concept of social capital has been very widely used across the social sciences. Notwithstanding its attractiveness, the concept is hard to define and has become something of a buzzword in social sciences.

Albeit the fact social capital has been criticised for being neither *social* nor *capital*, it is a broadly defined concept and can broadly be defined as connections and membership in a group. For example, Lorenzen (2007:801) notes that “in recent literature, social capital has been assumed to mean a lot of different things and a certain amount of erminological soup persists”. For Bourdieu (1983: 249), social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. As Coleman (1994: 302) writes, social capital is defined by its function, as resources derived from people’s social ties. It is not a single entity, but a variety of different entities, having two characteristics in common: they all consist of some aspect of a social structure, and they facilitate certain actions of individuals who are within the structure. Coleman’s notion of social capital, as Cemalcilar and Gökşen (2014:98) observe, is found to be attractive by researchers as it provides a conceptual link between attributes of individual actors and their immediate social contexts, most notably the household, school and neighbourhood.

Putnam (2000: 19) asserts that social capital is closely related to what some have called “civic virtue”. He further remarks that the difference is that social capital calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a sense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital. In spite of these multiples of definition, Lin (2001:19) contends that the premise behind the notion of social capital is rather simple and straightforward: *investment in social relations with expected returns in the marketplace*. Put differently, social capital is a broad term that encompasses the “norms and networks facilitating collective actions for mutual benefits” (Woolcock, 1998:155).

In summary, the notion of social capital can be summed up in two words: relationships matter. The central thought of social capital is that social networks are a valuable asset. Networks provide a basis for social cohesion because they enable people to cooperate with one another – and not just with people they know directly – for mutual advantage (Field 2008:14). Social capital is an investment (whether or not intended) in social relationships that make available to individuals a stock of resources raising returns from individual and joint efforts (Ostrom, 2001; Warren, 2008).

## **BOURDIEU’S SOCIAL CAPITAL AS ONTOLOGY, TRUTH AND METHOD**

This section draws on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, completed in 1958-59. He was a prominent German philosopher of the twentieth century, inspiring a variety of scholastic disciplines from aesthetics to theology; and a pupil of Martin Heidegger. In his oeuvre, the central thought is that truth only occurs once the full *ontological* dimension of *understanding* is recognised; and argued that “truth” and “method” were at odds with one another. For him, the *ontological structure* is best presented in terms of *language*. Gadamer identifies language acting as the medium for understanding and a means of sharing the complexities of human experience (Gadamer, 1975). Furthermore, language is the all-pervasive medium of tradition within which

truth is revealed. Gadamer contends that the truth is revealed in genuine aesthetic experience, however, is truth about the one reality which encompasses both subject and object.

Like Wittgenstein, Gadamer (1975) argued that we never understand anything in pure objectivity; rather we always understand on the basis of a pre-understanding provided us by the historical (and linguistic) tradition in which we find ourselves. He held that a proper understanding of how language connects to the world can only come through reflecting on Augustine's doctrine of the *Verbum interius*. This section aims to articulate Gadamer's work in relation to understanding and interpretation of Bourdieu's notion of social capital. For Gadamer, the relation between idea and thought and speech is linguistic. Flowing from this, we claim that there is a linguistic relationship between Bourdieu's social capital and Gadamer's "truth" and "method". For us, written words, on Bourdieu's social capital, are simply signs of spoken words. Hence, we argue that truth is irreducible to scientific method and there is no meaningful way to distinguish what the world is (ontology) from interpretation (hermeneutic) inherent in this linguistic act.

Perhaps it is significant to highlight that social capital is linguistic construct – it is of fundamental importance, especially for understanding text. Gadamer (1975) observes that every text is an opportunity to explore our own "linguistic usage" (p. 267). In addition to this, we derive our understanding of the text "from the linguistic usage of the time or of the author" (p. 267) but this confronts us with an awareness of the "difference between our own customary usage and that of the text" (p. 268). In line with this view, the notion of social capital, as an investment in social relations with an expected return in the marketplace, is central to Bourdieu's thought – it forms a key part of Bourdieu's conceptual tool kit. His early writing on social capital, as Field (2008:16) notes, was, then, part of a wider analysis of the diverse foundations of social order). Bourdieu saw the positions of agents in the social field as determined by the amount and weight of their relative capitals, and by the particular strategies they adopted to pursue their goals.

In spite of its prominence, he used the concept of social capital in the context of the field of education. Bourdieu (1986; 1987) asserts that capital is a source, form of wealth, which produces power – the term capital simultaneously represents both a *power relationship* and a *power resource*. He distinguishes capital not only in economic sense but also he gives it some different meanings. For him, there are different forms of capital such as cultural, symbolic and social (1987: 3-4; 1986: 245); and social capital is made up of social obligations and connections (1986:248). In the Marxian texts, capital is represented by the *size* of the network and the *volume* of the capital (economic, cultural, or symbolic) possessed by those whom the person is connected to (Marx 1973, 1975a, 1975b, 1987a, 1987b, 1989a, 1989b, 1996, 1998). In Bourdieusian language, social capital depends on the *size* of one's connections and *volume* or *amount* of capital in these connections' possession; represents a process by which individuals in the dominant class, by mutual recognition and acknowledgment, reinforce and reproduce a privileged group that holds various forms of capital and is a mere disguise for economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1987; Lin, 2001:23-24).

Let us conclude that Bourdieu's concept of social capital qualifies to be an ontology, truth and method – it is a linguistic construct. In Bourdieu's (1986, 1987) view, the volume of social capital possessed by a person depends on size of the network of connections that he or she can mobilise and on the volume of capital – economic, cultural, and symbolic – possessed by

each person to whom he or she is connected. Thus, Bourdieu's social capital is decomposable into two elements: first, the social relationship that allows the individual to claim resources possessed by the collectivity, and second, the quantity and quality of those resources (1986, 1987). In Bourdieusian language, as the medium for understanding and a means of sharing the complexities of human experience, social capital is the asset of the dominant class to maintain and reproduce group solidarity and preserve the group's dominant position (1986, 1987).

## **SOCIAL CAPITAL AS A POWER RELATIONS CONSTRUCT**

The concept of social capital recognizes that power is inherent in network cooperation – hidden, but debatably with highly visible effects. DeFilippis (2001) argues that Bourdieu's theory of social capital is the most explicit about the relationship between social capital and power. This is because Bourdieu's theory is “the most theoretically useful and sophisticated ... attempt to understand the production of classes and class divisions” (DeFilippis, 2001:783). Bourdieu's theory clarifies the fact that “social capital, while being constituted by social networks and relationships, is never disconnected from *capital*. Capital ... is simultaneously both economic and a set of power relations...” (DeFilippis, 2001:783). In the previous sections we have attempted to provide a conceptualization of social capital. In order to develop an analysis of the relationship between social capital and power relations we will attempt to conceptualize power relations.

The power we are analysing is, according to Foucault (1982:786) the power that “brings into play relations between individuals (or between groups)” as opposed to the power “which is exerted over things and gives the ability to modify, use, consume or destroy them”. Foucault (1982:791) observes that “power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus, not reconstituted from “above” society ...” Foucault (1982:792) delineates five important points to be established when an attempt is made to analyse power relations:

1. The system of differentiations which permits one to act upon the actions of others: differentiations determined by the law or by traditions of status and privilege; economic differences in the appropriation of riches and goods, shifts in the processes of production, linguistic or cultural differences in know-how and competence, and so forth.
2. The types of objectives pursued by those who act upon the actions of others: the maintenance of privileges, accumulation of profits, the bringing into operation the statutory authority, the exercise of a function or of a trade.
3. The means of bringing power relations into being: according to whether power is exercised by the threat of arms, by the effects of the word, by means of economic disparities, by more or less complex means of control...
4. The forms of institutionalization: these may mix traditional pre-dispositions, legal structures, and phenomena relating to custom or fashion...
5. The degrees of institutionalization: the bringing into play of power relations as action in a field of possibilities may be more or less elaborate in relation to the effectiveness of the instruments and the certainty of the results...

From our analysis of both social capital and power relations it is evident that there is a link between the two. Social capital implies the existence of social networks and relationships. These social networks and relationships are governed and controlled by those in power, that is, those who have a particular status bestowed on them by law, traditions, wealth, linguistic or cultural dominance over others. The wielders of power are able to design methods through which they maintain the privileges they already have and accumulate more profits. These could be the use of force or ideology through educational, legal, traditional, political or economic institutions. The development of social capital is often seen as a positive drive meant to benefit society. However, this beneficence often depends on how privileged the beneficiaries already are. For instance, sending children to school may seem like a beneficial undertaking for parents. But only children of parents who can afford to pay high fees, buy books and uniforms will benefit from being educated and finding good employment opportunities to be able to repeat the cycle of also educating their own children and thereby continuing on the family's monopoly on social capital. Even in situations where there are benefactors who might provide bursaries and scholarships to the poor children, there is always a catch. The benefactors decide what the children should learn, what skills they should acquire and sometimes where to study in order to receive financial assistance. And so the perpetuation of class divisions and the existing power relations continues. In the next section we provide a critique of ODeL through Bourdieu's and Marx's lens of social capital. We argue that on the surface ODeL seems like a beneficial concept just like social capital, yet in reality it is one of the many ways of perpetuating class divisions, inequalities and existing power relations.

### **CRITIQUING OPEN DISTANCE E-LEARNING THROUGH BOURDIEU'S LENS OF SOCIAL CAPITAL**

It would be apposite at this point to highlight that the theory of social capital has become increasingly fashionable in a broad range of social science disciplines. Hence, this section is in direct conversation with the text of Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, anthropologist, and philosopher. For the purposes of subjecting Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) to criticism, we proceed from an exposition that at philosophical level, it can be internalised/ incorporated, objectified or institutionalized. For us, ODeL is connected with Bourdieu's theoretical ideas on class and is an object of political and ideological struggles. In addition, as social relations construct, it could be used to produce or reproduce inequality – it plays an inhibiting role. Our view is that, ODeL fits perfectly through Bourdieu's lens – it shares attributes and features with Bourdieu's and Marx's work on social capital. Hence, ODeL is both a social and cultural capital which is largely in the hands of the *dominant* class – it is the asset of the bourgeoisie/capitalist.

Like cultural capital, social capital, as a social construct, is transmitted within the home. Perhaps it is noteworthy to mention that Bourdieu's concept of social capital has been highly influential in the discourses on class inequalities in educational attainment and of broader questions of class reproduction in advanced capitalist societies; and has generated a great deal of literature, both theoretical and empirical. For Kawachi (1999), the concept of social capital originally grew out of sociology and political science to describe the resources available to individuals through their affiliative behaviours and membership in community networks.

We claim that social capital is evidently an organised structure, fluid, complex and multi-dimensional. As Bourdieu (1986) observes, the individual's social capital might consist of institutionalised networks such as a family, a class or a political party - but also of networks held together only by the material or cultural exchanges between their members. Bourdieu goes on to say, social capital, as a tool of analysis, plays in the process of preserving and reproducing class structures within society, especially through mediating economic capital. As an explanatory tool, social capital is a way to explain how social and economic forces create and maintain capitalist culture.

Bourdieu is not alone in stressing the notion of social reproduction – Karl Marx's work will be considered in this section. Marx (1973) argued that it was necessary, rather, to arrive at a precise understanding of the internal structure of bourgeois society (commodities, value, money, capital and so on). He wrestles with the reality that the social moral fibre of production is not immediately evident, but only expressed and activated by way of particular, objective mediating forms, namely, commodities and money. Notwithstanding the fact that ODeL is seen as a massification of higher education, it is underpinned by bourgeoisie/capitalist attributes – it has social relations with the bourgeoisie (capitalists) and the dominated in the processes of commodity production and consumption. Hence, we view OdeL as a capitalist commodity. In support of this view, Marx (1997: 43) writes that “capitalist commodity production makes possible an appropriation of pre-capitalist history and is, at the same time, an epoch-making mode of exploitation, which in the course of its historical development revolutionises the entire economic structure of society by its organization of the labour process and its gigantic extension of technique, and towers incomparably above all earlier epochs”.

From a Marxist perspective, among others, the ODeL processes commence with the capitalist, who is bestowed with resources (capital). For Marx (1975a; 1975b; 1976; 1989a; 1996), capital, as a social notion, is part of the surplus value captured by capitalists or the bourgeoisie, who control production means in the circulation of commodities and monies between the production and consumption processes (Lin, 2001; Marx, 1998; Marx & Engels, 1976). As Marx (1973; 1975a; 1975b; 1987a; 1987b; 1989a; 1989b; 1996; 1998) puts it, “social capital is the concept of capital at the level of the capitalist economy as a whole, i.e. it is the complex concept embracing empirically detectable regularities of a capitalist economy, but also all the “laws” –the hidden causal determinants– of the capitalist system (the capitalist mode of production). In addition to this, capital represents an investment process on the part of the capitalist, as production requires assembling and organizing labor, land/rents, equipment, facilities, and so on (Marx, 1973, 1989a, 1989b, 1996, 1998). These entail investment of initial capital, effort, and social activities of coordination and persuasion (Marx, 1973; Marx & Engels, 1976; Lin, 2001).

Perhaps, is it worth mentioning that OdeL, as a linguistic construct, perpetuates a capitalist hegemony. Accordingly, at philosophical level, ODeL qualifies to be a tool for social reproduction – it fits Bourdieu's symbolic violence and social reproduction, and is consistent with the attributes of exploitative character of a clean capitalism. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) observe, social reproduction is the imposition of “symbolic violence” by the dominant

class on the dominated class. They further claim that symbolic violence occurs in that pedagogic action through which the culture and values of the dominant class are legitimated as the “objective” culture and values of the society, so that they are not seen or noticed at all as culture and values that support and sustain the dominant class. ODeL, as an elitist and profit driven construct, reflects the imposition by one class (the capitalists or a dominant group) of its values on another (the students or the dominated group). Hence, profit (capital) can be seen as what is at stake in the perpetual struggle in society or the social field.

Put in nutshell, our thesis amounts to this: ODeL, as social power, social and cultural capital, stresses the “invisible hand” of the dominant class behind the capitalisation process. In particular, ODeL, as a concept of capital at the level of the capitalist economy, constitutes a social relation of exploitation and domination. Perhaps a more intelligible phrase would be: like cultural capital, ODeL can be internalised/ incorporated, objectified or institutionalised. It can be incorporated as durable qualities of an individual such as knowledge or skills. Hence, we aver that ODeL as a purposive act of the dominated is appropriated for the purposes of production.

## CONCLUSION

We are finally in a position to form conclusions. In this discourse it emerged that social capital does matter – it has become progressively more fashionable in a wide array of social science disciplines in the search for answer to a broadening range of questions being confronted. We conclude that Bourdieu’s concept of social capital, as a linguistic construct, qualifies to be an ontology, truth and method. In addition, there is a symbiotic relationship between social capital and power. This symbiotic relationship manifests itself through the use of force or ideology through educational, legal, traditional, political or economic institutions. Lastly, from a Marxist perspective, OdeL (as both social and cultural capital) is underpinned by bourgeoisie/capitalist attributes – it has social relations with the bourgeoisie.

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