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## **The Structure of Literary Taste: Class, Gender and Reading in the UK**

One has to go back a long way to see the capacity and disposition to read *per se* as a sure sign of distinction in the West, and even to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century to witness the proclivity to read strictly for pleasure as a patent marker of worth. Over the last few hundred years, as documented by Raymond Williams (1965), consuming books for enjoyment has become widespread – at first among the emergent middle classes, and then latterly, notwithstanding a subsequent tailing-off once film and television arrived (Griswold et al, 2005), among the working class too. Cheapening production and distribution, now in a digital phase, has thus meant that reading books is, like listening to music but unlike going to the theatre or the opera, a particularly accessible and pervasive cultural practice. Yet this apparent democratisation, which can furnish a sense that reading is a relatively innocuous pastime compared to the so-called ‘beaux arts’ (Bennett et al, 1999) – an amusement that could ‘never do harm to the world’ according to Voltaire – brought not an end to symbolic domination but merely its transformation. As Williams (1965) observed, the growth of the reading public spawned unequal struggles to define ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, ‘good’ and ‘bad’, ‘desirable’ and ‘undesirable’ forms of reading, with newcomers to the pastime being remorselessly denounced for their poor taste by the old guard. Beginning with the top echelons decrying the – in Matthew Arnold’s words (cited in Williams, 1965: 190) – ‘hideous’ and ‘ignoble’ literary preferences of the expanding middle classes, later it became the reading matter of the now almost fully literate working class that was denigrated as ‘trashy’, from Hoggart’s (1958) disapproving assessment of the sensationalist, cliché-ridden yet viscerally seductive ‘sex-and-violence’ novels of the fifties through to today’s scathing reviews or derision of popular fare.<sup>1</sup>

Literary taste thus became, to use Bourdieu's (1984) terms, a space of difference more or less homologous with the class structure, or social space, that is to say, a 'stylistic possible' through which class habitus can be expressed and whose constitutive elements – individual books – act as rough symbols of class position when found on the shelves, in the hands or on the lips of readers. Though rather less central to the explosion of studies in recent years aiming to test, update and refine Bourdieu's vision of the relationship between class and culture than tastes in music or visual and performance arts, recent scholarship has tended to confirm some kind of homology between class and reading. Yet there are considerable methodological limitations curtailing the capacity of this research to effectively confirm or confute Bourdieu's thesis, as well as one clear divergence from Bourdieu: gender is much more important in structuring literary taste than he implied. This paper aims to push further, therefore, exploiting data from the 2012 wave of the British Cohort Study (BCS) to unravel the interplay of class and gender in structuring taste in books. Our tale begins, however, with a clarification of the Bourdieusian thesis and the efforts of its latter-day investigators.

### **Reading *Distinction* on *Distinction* in Reading**

Reading a book is no innocent act of individual style, as everyday personalist justifications might sometimes have it, no mere rational choice à la Gary Becker (1996) and no increasingly reflexive, playful decision as postmodernists and theorists of late modernity once argued (e.g. Giddens, 1991). For Bourdieu (1984), reading a specific volume is, like listening to a particular song, wearing certain clothes, playing a specific sport or talking in a distinct way, a project flowing from a habitus forged in particular conditions of existence. Greater or lesser distance from necessity, as determined by one's total possession of economic capital, cultural capital and social capital, but also the *composition* of one's capital stocks – that is, whether it comprises primarily economic capital (money, wealth), as for, say, business

leaders, or primarily cultural capital (education, and the symbolic mastery it proxies), as with, for example, teachers – shape what kinds of books are considered readable and unreadable, manageable or unmanageable, desirable and undesirable or, more prosaically, ‘my kind of thing’ or ‘probably not for me’. Those rich in cultural capital, for instance, may be drawn to tomes demanding and thus exercising their symbolic mastery, whereas those richer in economic capital may opt for books on economics, management and business in tune with their interest in accumulating their primary form of recognition. Those lacking either capital in abundance, meanwhile, may pick volumes appealing to the masteries and forms of recognition they do possess – practical mastery and the physical capital of sport or bodily power, for example (see Author 2015). In any case, it is not simply about a self-interested quest for status, but a matter of certain books appealing to one’s socialised libido and capacities and thus being paired in perception with a greater or lesser sense of interest and desire.

The outcome of the above relation between class habitus and book consumption is a certain statistical correspondence, playing out in everyday experience and perception, between class position and specific titles or types of book. Those corresponding with possession of ample cultural and economic capital, because these are the primary forms of misrecognition in society (i.e. arbitrary properties perceived as valuable), are generally seen as distinct and legitimate – as signs of being ‘clever’, ‘serious’, ‘worthy’ and perhaps to be ‘aspired to’ – and, by definition, the tastes of those with less cultural and economic capital are seen, even sometimes by those who have these tastes, as common and less worthy (a process Bourdieu dubbed symbolic violence). Interestingly, however, while this is the logic of Bourdieu’s position, he actually devoted relatively little space in *Distinction*, his *magnum opus* on class and culture, to book reading when compared with other stylistic possibilities like music, food, sport or newspaper readership. Sure enough he identified some basic

correspondences – adventure stories and love stories being preferred among the dominated, political/philosophical/art books among the cultural dominant and historical narrative among the economically dominant (1984: 128-9) – but he only once, to my knowledge, broached the causal link, briefly indicating a linear ratio between cultural capital and rarity or obscurity of books (1984: 116). Later work fleshed out the picture in other ways, making clear that literary taste is mediated by the field of literary production, pitting authors producing for the mass market against those producing for the restricted market of other writers and intellectuals, and the field of critics (Bourdieu, 1993, 1996), as well as the field of publishing houses (Bourdieu, 2008). Yet there is no doubt it occupied a subordinate role in the analysis of class taste, left in a more implicit, vague and undeveloped state than the dissections of aural, oral, sartorial, corporeal or cinematic pleasure.

Contemporary scholars have, nevertheless, used reading as a vehicle for putting Bourdieu's model of the relationship between class and culture to the test in their own nations. Some have stuck with frequency of reading as an indicator (Alderson et al, 2007), which is only so revealing, and the shadow of the 'omnivore thesis' – the idea that the dominant now happily consume all 'brow' levels as part of a disposition toward openness and cosmopolitanism while the dominated remain narrower in their tastes (Peterson, 1992) – looms large (Zavisca, 2005; Purhonen et al, 2010). Generally, however, the overriding conclusion across multiple countries tends to be that there is indeed a relationship between cultural capital (however defined) and highbrow/lowbrow forms of reading (Katz-Gerro and Shavit, 1998; Bennett et al, 1999, 2008; Wright, 2006; Bukodi, 2007; Prieur et al, 2008; Rosenlund, 2008). This is, though, a frequent limitation to this line of research, as well as one major departure from Bourdieu. The limitation is the neglect of the capital composition principle: in most cases the interest is purely in the relationship between cultural capital and reading, not the full correspondence between book consumption and class understood as a

multidimensional social space. The differences between those richer in cultural capital and those richer in economic capital, or the technical capital of certified practical masteries (e.g. trade skills), are thus obfuscated as one-dimensional measures such as education level or the Weberian EGP scheme (sometimes a modified version thereof) are deployed as proxies for class. This is not true of all the research: Prieur et al (2008) and Rosenlund (2008) do maintain a focus on the capital composition principle, but compared to some of the other studies reading seems to take a back seat in their analyses, as it did for Bourdieu.

The divergence from Bourdieu is the argument that gender is far more important in differentiating literary taste than he ever made out (see esp. Bennett et al, 1999, 2008; Wright, 2006). Some genres – horror and romance, for example – are clearly consumed at a greater rate by women, while others – like action or sports books – tend to be male fare, and the argument, building on the work of Radway (1984) and Fowler (1991), is that feminine taste is just as much the victim of symbolic denigration and domination as that of the dominated class, yet Bourdieu somewhat obscures that in his focus on class. This inevitably points to the broader question of how class and gender interrelate in Bourdieu's sociology, and the feminist critique that he did a poor job of theorising masculine domination (see Adkins and Skeggs, 2004). To sum up the position adopted here, elaborating Bourdieu's (2001) own position, the male/female binary is not the basis of a capital or a field in its own, as some have contended, but is a scheme of perception shaped by and shaping not only the *positioning* of those labelled 'men' and 'women' in a *multitude* of fields but also differential participation and strength of libidinal investment in certain fields, including the familial field (Bourdieu, 1998; Author, forthcoming). This means that the social space is intimately gendered, with certain class fractions being more highly female-dominated than others, and this will effect the objective and perceptual association of social positions with certain lifestyle practices. Bennett et al (1999) go the furthest in recognising this in relation to

reading, noting certain types of books are consumed most by working-class women or middle-class men, but their measure of class is not differentiated enough to unpick the details, particularly in relation to capital composition. They also shied away from adjudicating the relative causal efficacy of the different factors – whether gender is modifying class tastes or class modifying gender tastes, in other words – even though this can be modelled empirically with the right tools.

Both the limitation and the divergence from Bourdieu in the existing research are, in part, a product of a very particular methodological decision: the reliance on *genre* categories. To construct genres is an act of classification, a cutting up of the space of books (or artists, performers etc.) into groups approximating the objective faultlines of the space to greater and lesser degrees and emphasising different combinations depending on the interests of the classifier. They are notoriously tricky, especially when simply imported into sociology from market research or common sense, and the problems of relying on overly broad categories in efforts to refine or refute Bourdieu's thesis have been pointed out before (Author, 2011).<sup>3</sup> They are not necessarily useless, however – they can reveal *some* level of taste dispersion – so long as they are carefully constructed or, at the very least, disaggregated enough to allow subtler shades of difference to come through. In the previous scholarship, unfortunately, this tends not to be the case, with sometimes only four (e.g. Bukodi, 2007) or five (e.g. Katz-Gerro and Shavit, 1998) or seven (e.g. Wright, 2006; Bennett et al, 2008) genres of fiction and non-fiction book being included, the major casualty nearly always being any differentiation of books bearing in mind the capital composition principle. Bennett et al's (1999) study is perhaps the most robust, with 22 types of book analysed, but unfortunately their eight-category measure of class adopted 'of necessity' (p. 17), a hybrid of Marxist and Weberian principles, is unable to adequately unpick the multidimensional correspondence. It is probably also true – and no bad thing in itself – that the genre categories mobilised in

existing research are specifically designed to bring gender differences to the fore in a way Bourdieu's were not, thus at least partly explaining why the difference between masculine and feminine tastes is more prominent than in *Distinction*.

### **A Bourdieusian Test of Bourdieu's Thesis**

All in all, then, a thorough test of the relationship between class as Bourdieu conceives it – as a multidimensional space – and literary taste is needed, as is clarification of the relationship between class and gender in determining reading preferences and, as a logical extension of that, symbolic domination today. We can go some way toward providing these by exploiting the latest wave (2012, n=9841) of the British Cohort Study (BCS), a longitudinal panel survey tracking the lives of 17,000 people born in 1970, since it included a number of questions on cultural consumption and participation – types of television programme preferred, newspapers read, cultural events or venues attended and, the focus of our attention, types of books read. Respondents were offered a list of genres, covering both factual and fiction literature, and asked to identify all the types they 'usually read'. Without a doubt there is still likely to be considerable variation within the constructed genres (the logic for which is unknown), with two books falling under the same label of 'contemporary literary fiction' or 'romance', for example, potentially differing substantially in their form and content (the writing style, vocabulary, themes, characters etc), but they are far superior to anything encountered in previous studies. The lack of a distinct category for economics (that being rolled in with politics and current affairs) and business books, potentially tapping the tastes of the economically richer class fractions, is also particularly regrettable. Nevertheless this is the most differentiated listing of book genres readily available for analysis, and so, whatever its limits, it should prove to be more revealing than research conducted hitherto.

Analysing a single wave of a cohort study brings with it the peculiarity of all respondents being the same age, in this case forty-two. The effect of physical age is thus removed from the analysis, and with it any capacity to speak on what Savage et al (2013) have identified as a specifically youth-oriented ‘emerging cultural capital’ – or, more accurately, emerging signs and vehicles (e.g. ebooks, reading blogs, podcasts etc.) of the same old cultural capital (symbolic mastery). This is not the case, however, with what Bourdieu (1984) called *social* age – the degree to which the class fractions people of all physical ages find themselves in are established or emerging, and thus conservative or subversive in their aesthetic and political dispositions. Moreover, forty-two is a particularly revealing age, not only because trajectories through the social space, class habitus and cultural tastes will be well established but because the majority of the respondents (73 percent) have children at varying stages of the educational journey, from those just starting preschool to those finishing university studies, living in the household, allowing some reflection on the consequences of their tastes for social reproduction.

In order to circumvent some of the limitations of previous studies, and as part of a larger project to enable consistent and coherent statistical analysis across datasets from a Bourdieusian point of view, the measure of class deployed has been specifically designed to approximate maximum differences in not only capital volume but capital composition in the British social space. Based on the unit-level Standard Occupational Classification code found in government and social scientific datasets, individual jobs have been aggregated into analytical classes and class fractions after examination of their capital profiles in successive UK Labour Force Surveys. Details on the method of construction, and confirmation of the scheme’s criterion validity via multiple correspondence analysis, can be found elsewhere (Author, 2014).<sup>2</sup> The structure of the class fractions and some basic – by no means exhaustive – indicators of capital possession, as available in the BCS, are shown in Figure 1. Perhaps the

most pertinent pattern to note is the gendered structure of the social space, with the pole richer in cultural capital displaying a much higher ratio of women to men than the economic pole, to a greater extent the lower down in social space one goes.

[Figure 1 here]

### **The Structure of Correspondences**

Despite the growth of the reading public documented by Williams (1965), the propensity to read for pleasure at all, and the frequency of reading for pleasure, is still structured by class and gender, generating a general doxic sense of the kinds of person who are ‘always seen with a book’ or ‘always have a book on the go’ – as opposed to doing, and being seen doing, something else, whether watching television, attending dance classes or yachting (Griswold et al, 2005). Table 1 reveals that the regularity of reading is closely tied to three factors: overall volume of capital, the weight of cultural capital to economic capital and gender. Thus the most avid readers of all are the female professions and cultural dominant, and the least frequent are men from the dominated class, but the interplay reveals some interesting patterns – such as, for example, the fact that female caring service workers are more frequent readers than men from the cultural pole of the dominant class, let alone male business executives. *Whether* and *how often* one reads, however, is not the only principle of literary distinction, so now let us turn to the correspondence between class and *what* one reads.<sup>4</sup>

[Table 1]

Tables 2 and 3 displays rates of registering reading the genre of fiction book in question by class fraction for both men and women, with the distance from the lowest

registering class fraction recorded in parentheses. Tables 4 and 5 do the same for factual books. A couple of patterns are immediately apparent: some genres are far more popular across all classes and both genders, particularly crime/thriller books and autobiographies, both of which are broad and internally variegated enough in their style and subjects to allow for diverse readings; and some genres are patently associated more with one gender or the other. Action books, comics or graphic novels, computing and technology books, music books, scientific tomes, sports books, political/economic/current affairs volumes and history books are disproportionately favoured by men in class fractions while women from across the social space are more likely to plump for crime/thriller/mystery books, contemporary and classic literary fiction, historical fiction, romance novels, cookery or food books, family and parenting books, health and wellbeing books but also volumes on DIY, interiors and gardening. This might be described as an opposition between the instrumental-rational and the affective, the public and the private/familial, or the ‘outer’ and the ‘inner’ world as Bennett et al (2008) would have it. Ultimately it may reflect the difference between the feminine libido – interest in affective recognition, i.e. orientation toward and dedication to the family field and, by extension of that, care for others (manifest in maintenance of the domestic space, cooking for others and interest in the emotional states and wellbeing of self and real or fictional others) – and the masculine libido – real or fantasised mastery and recognition in specific fields beyond the family.

[Tables 2, 3, 4 and 5]

That major cleavage aside, however, there are notable differences in the distribution of tastes by class fraction. Among men, for example, crime/thriller/mystery novels – inviting the reader to play mental games (‘whodunit’) – appear to increase in popularity with height in

social space, as do professional and political/economic/current affairs books – marking them out as largely fodder for certain sections of the field of power – while, by contrast, books on DIY and sport – applications and celebrations of technical and physical capital – seem most popular among sections of the intermediate and dominated class, casting them as relatively middle- to lowbrow genres. Horror too, with its appeal to immediate, visceral experience, and sci-fi/fantasy books – perhaps offering fantastical escape from the humdrum reality of life in white-collar work and lower sections of the social space – appear to be more middle- to lowbrow. Perhaps most striking, however, is the clear tendency for those rich or relatively richer in cultural capital – thus tapping into both capital volume *and* capital composition – to disproportionately favour volumes that demand and satisfy symbolic mastery. This may be in terms of form or theme, as with classic and contemporary literary fiction, historical fiction and poetry, or via tomes addressed specifically to mastery of the outputs of the fields of cultural production – art/photography books and music books – and thus themes of creativity and expressivity, or else more generally the insertion of the present into an abstract, transcendent context, as with religious/philosophy books and history books. Cultural intermediaries, interestingly, appear most oriented toward books addressing health and wellbeing, fitting with Bourdieu’s characterisation of this class fraction – concerned with bodily appearance and personal liberation – in *Distinction*, as well as the relatively new genre of graphic novels. By contrast, certain types of book, namely action/adventure/war books and computing/technology books, are associated more with class fractions richer in economic or technical capital (i.e. business executives or technicians) or the white-collar workers, a large tranche of which will work with computers closely and/or be involved in the economic field. The computing/technology related books may suggest occupational or specific field effects, therefore, while the action/adventure/war books – while also perhaps being less concerned

with form than the tomes of the cultural capital rich – perchance speak to the individualistic and/or combative ethos of those competing in the economic field.

Many of these associations can be refined and given something of a visual form by comparing the top ten mentioned genres across fiction and non-fiction for each class fraction, with those genres displaying telling distributions shaded in varying tints (Figure 2). Immediately it can be seen that sport books – a most masculine genre – increases in popularity the lower one goes in social space but also, to a degree, the less cultural capital relative to economic capital the class fraction possesses. In this respect it follows the reverse pattern of crime/thriller/mystery books, which are the top pick among the dominant but then drop behind sports books and autobiographies for the dominated and most of the intermediate class. History books – the most popular non-fiction vehicle for stimulating symbolic mastery among men, it seems – offer an even starker contrast, ranking highly among those class fractions rich in cultural capital but much lower among others. Action/adventure/war books follow a similar, but less pronounced, pattern as sports books, being less popular among class fractions relatively rich in cultural capital but more popular among those richer in economic or technical capital in all classes, but also manual workers, finding itself positioned in the top three or four for each. We need to nuance the interpretation of action/adventure/war books above, therefore, to take into account the different orientations that may underpin reading them – the antagonistic, ‘macho’ business ethos for some, but perhaps the interest in and valorisation of physical capital for others. Both could be considered classed variants of a more masculine taste. Finally, it is worth pointing out the appearance of DIY/interiors/gardening books on the top ten lists of the dominated class fractions, especially the skilled workers, and nowhere else in order to highlight a distinctive element of the taste profile, or habitus, of the dominated – one focussed on the application of technical, practical mastery as well as evincing, perhaps, proximity to necessity as members of this class opt

(making a virtue of necessity) to undertake home improvements that others might pay someone else to do.

[Figure 2]

So much for the tastes of men – what about women? Returning to Tables 2 and 3, it can be seen that many of the patterns among men persist, but there are differences too. Classic and contemporary fiction, while more popular with women across the board, are disproportionately cited by class fractions rich in cultural capital, as are poetry, art/photography books, professional books, health and wellbeing books, religion and philosophy books and history books. The rates vary with height in social space, however, with art/photography books and history books – which might be construed as more ‘serious’ in their subject matter – being mentioned most by the cultural dominant and professions and health and wellbeing and religion/philosophy books – more in tune with an ethos of working on one’s self (mind and body) in line with the habitus of this class fraction suggested by Bourdieu – being more closely associated with the cultural intermediaries. On the other hand, crime/thriller/mystery books, sci-fi/fantasy novels and autobiographies (popular among men rich in cultural capital) seem to be of less interest to the cultural class fractions than they are to the economically or technically rich fractions (save the skilled workers). Some genres, moreover, are more clearly middle- to lowbrow. This is the case for horror novels and DIY/interiors/gardening books (with perhaps a difference in focus within that three-pronged category compared to men), as it was for the opposite sex, but also for the most feminine of genres: romance novels. Focussing on the immediate, visceral, emotional highs and lows of concrete individuals in a linguistically direct and efficient manner, like horror stories, these are least popular among the professions, and the dominant class fractions generally (white

collar workers less so), and most popular among administrators and caring services (the most feminised class fractions) as well as skilled workers and LMPs, the two categories often scoring lowest in terms of possession of cultural capital.

Once again if we look at the top ten genres for each class fraction we can view the patterns in a new way (Figure 3). Perhaps most striking is the tendency for romance novels to drop down the rankings with both height in social space and relative possession of cultural capital (excepting the caring services at the bottom of the class structure), mirroring the fate of sports books among men. In three out of four dominated class fractions they head the list, knocking the otherwise widely popular cookery and crime/thriller/mystery books off the top spots, whereas it comes in only fifth for the cultural dominant and seventh for the professions – behind contemporary literary fiction and professional volumes. We also see DIY/interiors/gardening books make the top ten amongst the dominated and – save the notable exception of the cultural intermediaries – intermediate classes but not the dominant class fractions. They even come as high as fourth for the skilled workers, signalling a connection with technical capital once again, perhaps. By contrast, classic fiction appears to rank relatively highly among the two class fractions richest of all in cultural capital, the professions and cultural dominant, as history books did for men, though without the same level of appeal to the cultural intermediaries and caring services.

[Figure 3]

### **Discussion: Symbolic Domination and Social Reproduction**

What, then, does the correspondence between class and literary taste look like? First of all, there is an opposition between those who read regularly and those who do not, which corresponds with possession of cultural capital but to different degrees for women and men.

Second, gender is fundamental in differentiating preferred genres along binaries of affect/instrumental reason, inner/outer and private/public, but we also see *within* each gender clear differences by both capital volume and capital composition. The most prominent finding is the tendency for the most clearly gendered genres – sport books for men, romance novels for women – to decrease in popularity with a rising capital volume and, particularly, possession of cultural capital. The same is broadly true of horror, DIY books and, among men, action books, suggesting an association between the dominated class and volumes focussed on not only immediate emotional highs and lows (fear, love, hate, etc.) but practical or technical (including sporting or martial) mastery. They are displaced at the opposite pole of social space by more ‘serious’ tomes which are either gendered applications of symbolic mastery – contemporary and classic fiction for women, history books for men – or relatively gender-neutral tomes plugging into the multitude of fields comprising the field of power, such as professional books.

There is also a tendency for both men *and* women rich in cultural capital to disproportionately read books demanding symbolic mastery, particularly classic and contemporary fiction, art/photography books, poetry, politics books and history books, recalling Bourdieu’s (1984: 382-3, 404) claim that gendered dispositions become less sharply differentiated the higher and further toward the cultural pole one is positioned within the social space. A man in the dominated class may well distance himself from the ‘sappy’ romance novels of a woman in the dominated class, therefore, but a woman in the dominant class might deride that same woman in the dominated class for reading supposedly low-quality ‘trash’ (cf. Author, 2010: 139). Meanwhile, males rich in economic and technical capital, and poor in cultural capital, continue to plump for the masculine genre of action and adventure novels, as if to cross-cut the heavy/light, symbolic/practical, mental/corporeal binaries associated with capital volume by opposing the focus on expression and creativity

among the cultural capital rich with an orientation toward stories of instrumental or competitive action.

Theoretically speaking, masculinity/femininity and capital composition may form more or less distinct axes in the dispersion of literary tastes, and in the space of lifestyles more generally (cf. Bennett et al, 2008) – though not, for reasons already stated, within the social space. Yet the two principles clearly blend into and play off one another, which is not surprising considering the gender composition of the class fractions richer in one capital or the other. In everyday practice, perception and parlance, therefore, they are likely to be conflated, such that holding, reading and talking about specific books or books of a specific type, whether it be a man or a women doing it, signify not only education and symbolic mastery (‘smartness’, ‘seriousness’, etc.) and thus, since this is misrecognised as inherently worthy in Western society, legitimacy (what ‘clever people’ read), but also femininity and thus, in a different order of social worth, inferiority – being ‘girly’, ‘weak’ or ‘soft’. Among the disproportionately masculine economic dominant – the dominant section of the dominant class, according to Bourdieu – these aspersions might dovetail with denigration of the cultural dominant’s (and cultural intermediaries’) ‘airy-fairyness’ and ‘bleeding hearts’. Among men in the dominated class, on the other hand, they may gel with rejection of ‘pretentious’ or ‘boring’ books deemed to be a ‘waste of time’, casting the kind of ‘mental’ work they demand as inherently effeminate (see Author, forthcoming), though this must be understood as a weapon of *defence* against the symbolic violence otherwise wielded against their ‘popular’ tastes, whether in interaction, via the media or, fundamentally, within schools where certain forms of literature are consecrated and others condemned or, at best, condescended.

This brings us to a final point. Research, whether sympathetic to Bourdieu or not, shows time and again that parental reading practices – not just frequency of reading but

literary taste – are fundamental to social reproduction (see De Graaf et al, 2000; Sullivan, 2001; Cheung and Anderson, 2003; Kraaykamp, 2003; Jaeger, 2011; Sullivan and Brown, forthcoming). Three-quarters of those in the BCS survey have children living at home, and so it could well be that those children constantly witness their parents reading certain books, or hear them talking about certain books, and see them as the kinds of books that are and can be read – that they could ‘have a go at’ with greater or lesser, more or less valued, encouragement or endorsement from their parents – and which then consolidate, build and channel existing orientations and masteries. This stands in relation to class, of course – to books appealing to and extending symbolic mastery, political-economic mastery or interest in practical and physical mastery. Yet it also stands in relation to gender, as sons see their fathers reading certain volumes and develop a sense of ‘what men read’, and may read volumes with greater or lesser paternal approval, while daughters do likewise with their mothers. Obviously the family as a field of forces, and the multiple fields structuring individual lifeworlds, can generate divergence and conflict (cf. Author 2011, 2012), but the general pattern of symbolic domination and social reproduction problematises programmes aiming to generate mobility and educational ‘success’ via reading, like the UK government’s drive to promote library membership, book clubs focussing on ‘classics’ and ‘great novels’ and poetry recitals in schools (Department for Education, 2015). This is not only because they are likely to appeal to those already disposed toward them, but because it presupposes and consolidates the universalisation of a specific class taste against which one’s worth is measured from childhood onwards.

## **Notes**

1. To give just one example, Oxford-educated British comedian Stewart Lee, generally considered ‘highbrow’ within his field (Freidman, 2014), dedicated an entire episode of his

*Comedy Vehicle* show aired on the BBC in 2009 to ridiculing the literary outputs – and by extension the readers – of Dan Brown and a host of popular celebrities.

2. Bourdieu (1984) himself tended not to rely on genre categories, except, interestingly, in relation to reading.

3. A terminological note: the label ‘cultural intermediaries’ in the class scheme covers very much the same sort of occupational terrain as Bourdieu’s (1984) original use of it in *Distinction*. Unfortunately, work inspired in part by Bourdieu, from Featherstone (1991) onwards, has subsequently widened and blurred the meaning of the notion by equating cultural intermediaries solely with the mediation of culture – a *substance* – rather than their intermediate status in the social space – a *relational* position (see e.g. Smith Maguire and Matthews, 2014).

4. I have stuck with tabular analysis rather than deploy multiple correspondence analysis, the favoured technique among Bourdieusians, for two reasons. First, the interest is in the *direct* (albeit gendered) correspondence between class and reading tastes rather than the space of literary taste *per se* and its homologies – i.e. the objective and perceptual relation between certain (types of) books and class rather than all the structural positions of the holder or reader that might be co-given in perception of a specific book. Second, in practice the binary mentioned/not mentioned nature of the variables sets up a model distinguishing those who read from those who do not – which we have already established – and then, secondarily, gender, which we will unpick more closely with tabular analysis anyway.

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