

VU Research Portal

Engaging Bourdieu in a comparative perspective. Social structure and lifestyle in Europe

Otte, Gunnar; Nagel, Ineke; Lemel, Yannick

published in

Poetics

2019

DOI (link to publisher)

[10.1016/j.poetic.2019.101366](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2019.101366)

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

document license

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Otte, G., Nagel, I., & Lemel, Y. (2019). Engaging Bourdieu in a comparative perspective. Social structure and lifestyle in Europe. *Poetics*, 74, 1-4. Article 101366. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2019.101366>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl



Engaging Bourdieu in a comparative perspective. Social structure and lifestyle in Europe



Gunnar Otte^{a,*}, Ineke Nagel^b, Yannick Lemel^c

^a Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, Mainz, Germany

^b Department of Sociology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands

^c GEMASS & CREST/Paris-Sorbonne University, French National Center for Scientific Research, France

When in November 2010 the 30th anniversary – or, at that time, in fact the 31st anniversary – of Pierre Bourdieu's original publication of *La Distinction* was celebrated at a huge international conference in Paris, a large number of papers was presented that tried to reconstruct and empirically engage Bourdieu's model of social space in various countries (see, for a selection, [Coulangeon & Duval, 2013, 2015](#)). The conference papers demonstrated that in some country contexts Bourdieu's famous model could be reproduced quite well, while in others it failed. His model basically holds that (a) lifestyles are systematically shaped by, or are “homologous” with, agents' social positions, (b) that they are structured most strongly by the volume and the relative weight of agents' economic and cultural capital and (c) that this structure tends to be reproduced inter-generationally by the status-conserving operating mode of the educational system ([Bourdieu, 1984](#)). Bourdieu did not conduct cross-nationally comparative research himself, but he seemed to be confident that his model could be generalized from France to modern, industrialized societies, as he declared in front of a Japanese audience ([Bourdieu, 1998: 1–3](#)).

Bourdieu's social space map has become one of the most prominent models of social stratification in the history of sociology. This model was developed partly inductively on the basis of various social surveys from 1960/70s France; partly, the choice of its main dimensions, capital volume and composition, was guided by Bourdieu's capital theory ([Bourdieu, 1986](#)). In contrast to other influential class approaches (e.g. [Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992](#); [Wright, 1997](#)), Bourdieu never proposed a concrete measurement instrument or clear construction rules for his model. This explains the longstanding disaccord between the frequent reception of Bourdieu's social space map in sociological textbooks and the scarce attempts to test the empirical validity and generalizability of his conception. The publication of single-country studies since the turn of the millennium, the Paris conference, and other symposia demonstrate the increasing interest of the scientific community in the empirical investigation of Bourdieu's model (e.g. [Blasius et al., 2019](#)). Trying to reproduce it means to decide on the demarcation of a population, a suitable sampling frame, the selection of lifestyle items, the operational definition of social position categories (forms of capital, social classes as well as further indicators of social position), the analytical techniques and, if the latter are meant to follow Bourdieu's spirit, the specification of multiple correspondence analyses (e.g. to decide which variables are treated as active and as supplementary; see [Le Roux & Rouanet, 2010](#)).

A widespread approach to engaging Bourdieu today is to use secondary data which were originally collected for other purposes than the reproduction of his social space map (e.g. [Coulangeon & Lemel, 2009](#); [Glévarec & Pinet, 2013](#)). This approach is challenging because secondary data often do not contain variables that are suitable to measure economic and cultural capital beyond income and education and to capture the subtleties of lifestyles beyond broad activity and preference indicators. For example, to map the effects of Bourdieu's concept of capital composition on lifestyles, it is not sufficient to know how often somebody visits theatres or foreign countries but also how intellectually demanding (cultural capital) or materially conspicuous (economic capital) these practices are.

Comparing Bourdieu's results from the 1960/70s with France and other countries today raises questions of measurement equivalence and survey harmonization ([Dubrow & Tomescu-Dubrow, 2016](#)). Neither can we assume that categories of social position as well as indicators of cultural products, practices and preferences are constant over time nor can we expect them to be invariant

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: gunnar.otte@uni-mainz.de (G. Otte), f.a.nagel@vu.nl (I. Nagel), lemel@ensae.fr (Y. Lemel).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2019.101366>

across countries and other spatial units. Many of the cultural products in Bourdieu (1984) famous map – such as Chinese restaurants, cocktails and stamp collections – have supposedly changed their social meaning and it is without doubt insufficient to tie the conception of lifestyles to agents' proximity to the – albeit relatively stable – Western cultural canon alone. This problem of survey equivalence is rarely spelled out clearly in studies which discuss their empirical results in the light of Bourdieu's model.

Even if primary data are collected in surveys which are “designed partly to replicate Bourdieu's work” (Bennett et al., 2009: 1) and which use multiple correspondence analyses (MCA), the results are hard to interpret vis-à-vis Bourdieu's original study. In one of the most important projects inspired by Bourdieu, the British *Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion* survey, Bennett et al. (2009: 43ff.) identify an opposition of engagement versus disengagement in cultural activities and an opposition of legitimate/established versus commercial/emerging forms of cultural taste as the two most important dimensions of social space (see also Le Roux, Rouanet, Savage, & Warde, 2008). The first dimension is strongly structured by educational level and social class, the second is heavily age-related. None of these dimensions can be properly brought in line with Bourdieu's social space map. Bennett et al. (2009: 255) speculate that the deviation from the original model might have to do with the weaker institutionalization of legitimate culture in the United Kingdom. However, a systematic comparison is not tenable because their operationalization of lifestyles is not grounded in matters of survey equivalence and differs considerably from Bourdieu's. An early German study that tried to replicate Bourdieu's model by using a more equivalent – in part literal – set of lifestyle items came up with a divergent result as well (Blasius & Winkler, 1989). In this case, the reason might be that age-related variables, such as employment status, were included among the structuring variables – a modelling decision that probably undermines the power of the capital composition dimension. In their results, both studies are exemplary for frequent failures to reproduce Bourdieu's social space map: While lifestyles are, in many studies, significantly structured by agents' total capital endowment (“capital volume”) and gradational rankings of occupational groups (“classes”), it seems to be more difficult to identify their “capital composition” as a core structuring principle. Instead, lifestyles are in an important way structured by variations in biographical (age, life course) and historical time (birth cohorts, generations).

Interestingly, studies that are built on a close reading and careful reconstruction of Bourdieu's procedures seem to be more successful in generating results more aligned with his publications. Good cases in point are the Scandinavian studies carried out in Aalborg and Stavanger (Priour, Rosenlund, & Skjott-Larsen, 2008; Rosenlund, 2015). It is also important to note that Bourdieu's social space map was itself contingent upon methodological decisions. As one of Bourdieu's former collaborators reports, other solutions that focus less strongly on class and capital would have been possible if variables such as age had been introduced more prominently (de Saint Martin, 2015: 24).

In consequence of these inconsistencies in primary and secondary data-based attempts to reproduce Bourdieu's model, we are currently not able to decide if the discrepancies that show up reflect real-world variation of national social spaces or differences in the methodological procedures used. Against this background and subsequent to the Paris conference, a number of sociologists agreed to head for more systematic comparisons. The basic idea was to use secondary data sets that contain a broad variety of lifestyle variables and to harmonize these data *ex post* in such a way that comparative analyses across space or time would be feasible (Granda, Wolf, & Hadorn, 2010). While initially the cross-national perspective dominated the collaborative work, temporal comparisons within single countries worked out better in the end. Therefore, only papers with time comparisons appear in this special issue. Much more work was done over the last years but repeatedly our research team ran into limitations of the available data and problems of establishing measurement equivalence. Still, we comment on both perspectives.

In *cross-national perspective*, truly comparative lifestyle studies are rare. They focus either on single lifestyle dimensions, mostly highbrow consumption (Gerhards, Hans, & Mutz, 2013; Katz-Gerro, 2002; Van Hek & Kraaykamp, 2013), on specific population segments, like the upper-middle class (Lamont, 1992), or on institutionalized cultural patterns, such as high and popular arts coverage in the media (Janssen, Verboord, & Kuipers, 2011). Recently, a few attempts were made to compare national social spaces more holistically: Based on lifestyle data which were collected using similar questionnaires, the United Kingdom was compared to Finland (Purhonen & Wright, 2013) and to Australia (Bennett, Bustamante, & Frow, 2015). In these three countries, similar structures of social space can be identified which deviate in important ways from Bourdieu's model, as shown above with the British study. Some scholars object that, in these studies, social spaces are not modeled closely enough on the Bourdieusian exemplar (Atkinson & Rosenlund, 2014; Flemmen, Jarness, & Rosenlund, 2018). Nevertheless, the attempt of an *ex ante* harmonized data collection in several country contexts can be regarded as current best practice.

In general, harmonizing economic and cultural capital as well as lifestyle variables is a much bigger challenge than the rather widespread – but nonetheless demanding – efforts to harmonize socio-demographic variables (Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik & Wolf, 2003). For example, home ownership or having a second home – common indicators of economic capital – vary considerably in prevalence across countries due to differences in housing prices and spatial mobility patterns. While in some contexts, home ownership is the standard form of living, it is considered a prestigious investment in others. It thus seems necessary to specify functionally equivalent indicators for the theoretical concepts. This means resorting to indicators that might nominally differ by country but capture the same higher-order concept (such as “economic capital”). It is indispensable to have experts with country-specific knowledge in order to choose and translate equivalent indicators. Even though large-scale surveys on cultural participation and lifestyles are available in various countries and we assembled a multinational research team, it proved to be cumbersome to harmonize secondary data *ex post*.

The *intertemporal perspective* is tied to issues of social change. Some scholars argue that processes of rising affluence and social security, educational expansion and social mobility have led to an individualization of social inequalities, i.e. a decoupling of lifestyles from traditional bases of social stratification (Beck, 1992; Glévairec & Pinet, 2009). A more moderate position postulates that the arrangement of lifestyles along the dimension of capital volume has been transformed from an opposition of snobbish distinction versus mass consumption to a new hierarchy of all-inclusive (“omnivorous”) versus limited (“univorous”) tastes (Peterson & Kern, 1996). Both theses share the assertion that Bourdieu's model is outdated due to processes of social and cultural change. However,

there is a scarcity of research that empirically analyzes the transformation of social space across multiple time points in a holistic manner. As mentioned above, again, issues of equivalence arise.

In this special issue two papers take up the challenge to investigate the potential transformation of social space over time. Sebastian Weingartner and Jörg Rössel (this issue) draw on three population surveys which were conducted in Switzerland in 1976, 1988 and 2013. They use a rather small, but similar set of highbrow and popular leisure activities to construct separate spaces of lifestyles for the three time points. Quite similar to the British study (Bennett et al., 2009), they find an engagement–disengagement and a highbrow–popular axis as the main dimensions, which are somewhat stable over time. In contrast, a re-alignment of the space of social positions has taken place: While highbrow–popular leisure activities were a matter of education in the 1970s, age has become their main structuring principle since the late 1980s. Education and vertical social position are, instead, associated with a culturally engaged–disengaged leisure in more recent times. For their investigation, Weingartner and Rössel combine MCA with techniques of cluster and regression analysis innovatively.

While their results appear to be rather contradictory to the Bourdieusian model, Lennart Rosenlund (this issue) uses data from a replicative survey in the Norwegian city of Stavanger to show that, from 1994 to 2009, the capital composition principle has grown as a structuring force of social space next to capital volume and that today Bourdieu's model fits the data even better than in earlier times. In a methodologically elaborate way, Rosenlund merges the data of the two time points and varies the use of lifestyle and capital indicators as active and supplementary variables in MCA. His procedure necessitates an equivalent data collection and operationalization at all time points and should be imitated in future studies.

Whereas these two papers address the homology argument of Bourdieu's model, Ineke Nagel and Yannick Lemel (this issue) take up Bourdieu's reproduction thesis (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) by comparing the lifestyles of parents and their grown-up children at a later point in time. Subsequent to an early study of DiMaggio (1982) and a refinement of the reproduction thesis (De Graaf, De Graaf, & Kraaykamp, 2000) a lot of empirical work has accumulated that investigates the effects of parental cultural capital on children's cultural participation and educational success (for an overview, see Sullivan, 2011). However, many studies focus on cultural participation alone or examine other single dimensions of lifestyles. In contrast, Nagel and Lemel take a multidimensional perspective and study the intergenerational reproduction process in greater detail. Using a unique data set from the Netherlands and employing structural equation modelling, they test whether the economic and cultural dimensions of parents' lifestyles influence their children's status attainment process (social reproduction) and their lifestyles as adults (lifestyle transmission). They find considerable evidence for Bourdieu's theory: The extent to which parental lifestyles are shaped in an economic or cultural fashion determines heavily the economic or cultural lifestyle orientation of their grown-up children.

From our collaborative work and the published papers, several implications for future research can be drawn. First, to gauge the cross-national and intertemporal scope of Bourdieu's (or any other) social space model, the methodology must be kept constant across contexts. The insight of our endeavor to make use of secondary data is that harmonization efforts should start at the level of the data collection process because *ex post* harmonization of capitals and lifestyles does not work well with most of the existing data sets. *Ex ante* harmonization means to replicate an existing study in its core methodology, or to parallelize the whole data collection process in several contexts, and, in either case, to carefully think about survey equivalence issues. Second, engaging Bourdieu in a comparative context can be done using different methodologies. While Rosenlund pleads for a rather orthodox – albeit innovative within the MCA paradigm – Bourdieusian approach, the papers of Weingartner & Rössel as well as Nagel & Lemel show that analytical techniques such as cluster analysis, regression analysis and structural equation modelling can be very fruitful in testing Bourdieu's hypotheses. Third, during our meetings the question emerged if structures of lifestyles and social positions should be searched for exploratively in a large item universe without knowing the result or if, as Rosenlund argues, a Bourdieusian social space should be systematically constructed in an iterative process. In either case, it seems important for future research not only to investigate the homology between the spaces of social positions and lifestyles, but also to quantify the strength of the association. Moreover, the social space model should be applied to specific research questions, such as the structuring of political preferences, in order to test the explanatory power of Bourdieu's model in specific realms (e.g. Harrits, Prieur, Rosenlund, & Skjøtt-Larsen, 2010). We celebrate the fortieth birthday of *La Distinction* this year and Bourdieu's opus magnum will certainly inspire further research far into the future.

References

- Atkinson, W., & Rosenlund, L. (2014). *Mapping the British social space: Towards a bourdieusian class scheme*. University of Bristol Working Paper.
- Beck, U. (1992). *Risk society. Towards a new modernity*. London: Sage.
- Bennett, T., Savage, M., Silva, E. B., Warde, A., Gayo-Cal, M., & Wright, D. (2009). *Culture, class, distinction*. London: Routledge.
- Bennett, T., Bustamante, M., & Frow, J. (2015). The Australian space of lifestyles in comparative perspective. In P. Coulangeon, & J. Duval (Eds.). *The Routledge companion to Bourdieu's distinction* (pp. 255–282). London: Routledge.
- Blasius, J., & Winkler, J. (1989). Gibt es die "feinen Unterschiede"? Eine empirische Überprüfung der Bourdieuschen Theorie. *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 41, 72–94.
- Blasius, J., Lebaron, F., Le Roux, B., & Schmitz, A. (Eds.). (2019). *Empirical investigations of social space*. Heidelberg: Springer.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction. A social critique of the judgement of taste*. London: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.). *Handbook of theory and research in the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). New York: Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1998). *Practical reason: On the theory of action*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.-C. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. London: Sage.
- Coulangeon, P., & Lemel, Y. (2009). The homology thesis: Distinction revisited. In K. Robson, & C. Sanders (Eds.). *Quantifying theory: Pierre Bourdieu* (pp. 47–60). Heidelberg: Springer.
- Coulangeon, P., & Duval, J. (Eds.). (2013). *Trente ans après La Distinction de Pierre Bourdieu*. Paris: Éd. La Découverte.
- Coulangeon, P., & Duval, J. (Eds.). (2015). *The Routledge companion to Bourdieu's distinction*. London: Routledge.
- De Graaf, N. D., De Graaf, P. M., & Kraaykamp, G. (2000). Parental cultural capital and educational attainment in the Netherlands: A refinement of the cultural capital

- perspective. *Sociology of Education*, 73, 92–111.
- De Saint Martin, M. (2015). From 'Anatomie du goût' to *La distinction*. Attempting to construct the social space. Some markers for the history of the research. In P. Coulangeon, & J. Duval (Eds.). *The Routledge companion to Bourdieu's distinction* (pp. 15–28). London: Routledge.
- DiMaggio, P. (1982). Cultural capital and school success: The impact of status culture participation on the grades of U.S. High School Students. *American Sociological Review*, 47, 189–201.
- Dubrow, J. K., & Tomescu-Dubrow, I. (2016). The rise of cross-national survey data harmonization in the social sciences: Emergence of an interdisciplinary methodological field. *Quality & Quantity*, 50, 1449–1467.
- Erikson, R., & Goldthorpe, J. H. (1992). *The constant flux. A study of class mobility in industrial societies*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Flemmen, M., Jarress, V., & Rosenlund, L. (2018). Social space and cultural class divisions: The forms of capital and contemporary lifestyle differentiation. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 69, 124–153.
- Gerhards, J., Hans, S., & Mutz, M. (2013). Social class and cultural consumption: The impact of modernisation in a comparative european perspective. *Comparative Sociology*, 12, 160–183.
- Glévairec, H., & Pinet, M. (2013). Principes de structuration des pratiques culturelles: stratification et âge. Une révision du modèle de La Distinction. *Revue Européenne des Sciences Sociales*, 51, 121–152.
- Granda, P., Wolf, C., Hadorn, R., et al. (2010). Harmonizing survey data. In J. A. Harkness (Ed.). *Survey methods in multinational, multiregional, and multicultural contexts* (pp. 315–332). Hoboken: Wiley.
- Harrits, G. S., Prieur, A., Rosenlund, L., & Skjott-Larsen, J. (2010). Class and politics in Denmark. Are both old and new politics structured by class? *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 33, 1–27.
- Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik, J. H. P., & Wolf, C. (Eds.). (2003). *Advances in cross-national comparison. A European working book for demographic and socio-economic variables*. New York: Kluwer.
- Janssen, S., Verboord, M., & Kuipers, G. (2011). Comparing cultural classification. High and popular arts in European and U.S. elite newspapers, 1955–2005. *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 51, 139–168 special issue 'Lebensstilforschung'.
- Katz-Gerro, T. (2002). Highbrow cultural consumption and class distinction in Italy, Israel, West Germany, Sweden, and the United States. *Social Forces*, 81, 207–229.
- Lamont, M. (1992). *Money, morals, and manners. The culture of the French and American upper-middle class*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Le Roux, B., & Rouanet, H. (2010). *Multiple correspondence analysis*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Le Roux, B., Rouanet, H., Savage, M., & Warde, A. (2008). Class and cultural division in the UK. *Sociology*, 42, 1049–1071.
- Peterson, R. A., & Kern, R. M. (1996). Changing highbrow taste: From snob to omnivore. *American Sociological Review*, 61, 900–907.
- Prieur, A., Rosenlund, L., & Skjott-Larsen, J. (2008). Cultural capital today. A case study from Denmark. *Poetics*, 36, 45–71.
- Purhonen, S., & Wright, D. (2013). Methodological issues in national-comparative research on cultural tastes: The case of cultural capital in the UK and Finland. *Cultural Sociology*, 7, 257–273.
- Rosenlund, L. (2015). Working with *distinction*. Scandinavian experiences. In P. Coulangeon, & J. Duval (Eds.). *The Routledge companion to Bourdieu's distinction* (pp. 157–186). London: Routledge.
- Sullivan, A. (2011). The intergenerational transmission of lifestyles. *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 51, 196–222 (special issue 'Lebensstilforschung').
- Van Hek, M., & Kraaykamp, G. (2013). Cultural consumption across countries: A multi-level analysis of social inequalities in highbrow culture in Europe. *Poetics*, 41, 323–341.
- Wright, E. O. (1997). *Class counts. Comparative studies in class analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.