

ABSTRACT

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TITLE :
CULTURAL CAPITAL AS RESOURCES FOR LEADERSHIP
AND IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

This paper aims to understand the process of how cultural capital for leadership and impression management is learnt and changes over people's career life. While consumer research asserts that people widely use consumption and other practices to establish their desirable self, most studies rely on snap-shot, cross-sectional views only. They also focus mainly on leisure and home settings, giving little attention to the self-construction and leadership practices in the mundane context of the workplace. As the embodied style of interactive behaviour contributes to effective leadership, 'cultural capital becomes a basis for the construction of leadership' when valued in a structure or a field (Spillane et. al., 2003, p.3). Building on the sociological work of Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu, this study aims to take a longitudinal biographical view to explore how people accumulate and enact cultural capital for leadership building and impression management over their career trajectories from junior to senior executive roles.

Based on retrospective narrative inquiries (Davies & Fitchett, 2015) and a novel on-route walking-with interview (Richardson, 2015) to capture bodily and other affective resonances, this paper reports on our analysis so far with ten senior executives in Hong Kong, as part of an on-going study. The study reveals that mutability and agency are key to understand the biographical evolution of cultural capital for leadership establishment and impression management. There are few sustainable or permanent resources for impression management, and they are found to keep changing over the career life of people. With little working experience and thin cultural capital, junior professionals only rely on extrinsic 'personal fronts' (Goffman, 1959) to extend their work identity (Tian and Belk 2005). Over time, and as cultural capital is accumulated and matured through accrued learning and socialisation (Bourdieu, 1977; Skeggs 2004), senior executives pick up intrinsic capitals and competences relevant to their fields to build up embodied habitus that differentiate them from the juniors. They enact leadership through inherent resources such as discourse, ability to read stakeholders' mind, decisive judgement, self-motivation, work-life balance and industrial networking. We report in this paper the kinds of intrinsic resources used by executive leaders and how these distinguish them from the junior executives. We also show how the workplace is itself a potent ground for learning embodied competences for workplace leadership. Our data reveals that secondary socialization through observation of the referenced others and continuous self-reflection is a crucial source of acquiring cultural capital for identity construction.

The study also attends to the field-specific nature of cultural capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) where leadership and professional competences valued in one 'field' (be it an industry or a corporation) can become liabilities or capital shocks in another. Such cultural shock, or as Bourdieu says 'hysteresis effect', is explored as the rupture between the changing field conditions (McDonough & Polzer, 2012) and we example where professionals shift from one field (e.g. industry) to another how their embodied habitus causes conflicts and incongruity in the changing structures.

To extend Bourdieu's theory, the study finds that a more 'superior' cultural capital shared by leaders is not only residing in their adaptability to a given corporate or industrial structure, but in their competence of knowing their true self and identifying complementary and self-congruent fields to settle in. Rendering 'cultural fit' to people's habitus, the optimal fields allow professionals to be more 'true to themselves' when manoeuvring and advancing their desired leadership positions. We see that no specific leadership qualities are perfect or sustainable for all working fields, but experienced executives possess those 'superior' capitals to find desirable match between the two, and this in itself could be perceived as a form of 'sustainable leadership' expressed as rest, calm and self-knowing in one's career.

Except a few readings which mainly relate to educational research (Spillane et. al., 2003), very little literature employs the concept of cultural capital to study leadership. This study therefore would further our understanding on the related capitals used by leaders and how such resources are acquired and accumulated over people's career courses. Future comparative research can be extended to other western, non-collectivist contexts where 'power distance' are differently negotiated (Hofstede, 1980).

Keyword: cultural capital, habitus, leadership, impression management

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