

Dismantling Bias Conference Series

Bridging the Class Divide: The Development and Validation of Cultural Capital Diversification

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ABSTRACT

From gaining employment and meeting performance expectations to scaling organizational ranks, members of the working class are disadvantaged relative to their middle- and upper-class counterparts. This disadvantage is due in part to a lack of social capital, where employees from the working class lack connections to key organizational members. That is, organizations stratify along class lines because of the tendency to form homophilous relationships, creating social closure that undermines employees from the working class. Thus, the ability to bridge class divides emerges as critical means of supporting workers from the working class. The question remains, however, about who can bridge this divide.

In this paper, we introduce the concept of *cultural capital diversification* (CCD)—which we define as an individual’s developmental tendency to switch adaptively between social class contexts. We argue that CCD equips people to ally with colleagues from a lower social class and better forge valuable connections between people from different social class backgrounds, resulting in more equitable networks. Theoretically, people develop CCD via social mobility, as spending time in a different social class culture provides new class-specific knowledge, skills, and other characteristics. We extend this theoretical perspective by suggesting that social mobility is not a necessary prerequisite for the development of CCD, as other experiences (i.e., volunteer work or cultural activities) expose individuals to class specific characteristics different from their own which can then be adapted and deployed to bridge the class divide.

To investigate our claims, it is necessary (1) to develop and validate a measure consistent with our definition, (2) examine the antecedents of CCD to determine how to best cultivate it in potential allies, and (3) examine the consequences of CCD to see if it does, in fact, lead to allyship behaviors and more diverse and equitable social networks. To develop our measure of CCD, we first assess content validity of potential items among a sample of subject matter experts. Then, across two additional samples, we examine the measure’s psychometric properties including factor structure, reliability, and convergent and discriminant validity. Finally, we establish the nomological network of our construct across two three-wave longitudinal studies.

In the first longitudinal study, we find as expected that CCD is predicted by social mobility and relates to important allyship behaviors such as social integration, knowledge sharing, and group cohesion. In the second study—for which data collection will be completed in November 2021—we explore a more diverse array of antecedents and consequences. We expect to find that geographic mobility, experiences abroad, diverse work experiences, and volunteer and cultural experiences may contribute to the development of CCD. Additionally, we expect our findings to reveal that employees with higher levels of CCD have more diverse and equitable networks and that these ties are stronger compared to the ties of those employees with lower levels of CCD. Together, these studies (1) provide support for the validity of our nine-item CCD scale; (2) show that although CCD is a developmental tendency that can result in part from social mobility, other factors also predict CCD, suggesting it may be cultivated in employees from different social class backgrounds; and (3) show that cultivating CCD may be one way to bridge class divides in organizations, reducing inequity in access to social capital and barriers to knowledge sharing.

We believe our paper addresses several questions posed by the special issue at OBHDP. First, we identify several potential antecedents to CCD, which should inform of us of how we might be able to develop and cultivate it in employees. For example, evidence that CCD is developed via volunteer experiences might suggest that organizations could encourage participation in a corporate volunteering program. Second, we distinguish between ingroup and outgroup allies with respect to CCD and assess whether group membership impacts outcomes of CCD. By considering social mobility in conjunction with other antecedents, we address whether ingroup allies (i.e., someone who comes from a working-class background and has higher levels of CCD) are different from outgroup allies (i.e., someone who has not experienced social mobility but has adapted CCD via other means), and how this impacts potential outcomes of CCD. This is important because, to the extent our findings suggest multiple pathways for the development of CCD, we broaden the theoretical perspective of who can act as an ally. Finally, we demonstrate that CCD can be a valuable tool for creating more diverse and equitable networks which can bridge the class divide, bringing together disparate organizational members across the class divide, potentially improving opportunities for working-class individuals.