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Social Class and Transnational Human Capital

How Middle and Upper Class Parents
Prepare Their Children for Globalization

Jürgen Gerhards, Silke Hans
and Sören Carlson



This is a rigorous and empirically-rich study of the ways in which families go about accumulating transnational human capital – focussing, in particular, on the role of bilingual pre-school education and programmes that allow school children to spend up to a year abroad. It emphasises how access to such schemes is socially-patterned, and thus the important role they play in reproducing social inequalities across society. This is an important book for sociologists of education and others interested in the social impact of initiatives to ‘internationalise’ education.

Rachel Brooks, *Professor of Sociology, University of Surrey*

How does social reproduction change in an age of international mobility? Delving into a variety of original sources, Gerhards, Hans and Carlson’s book disentangles the strategies adopted by middle-upper class European families struggling to push their children into the ranks of the winners of globalization. An illuminating read.

Ettore Recchi, *Sciences Po Paris*

This book provides a convincing theoretical and empirical perspective on the generation of inequality of transnational capital over the life course. Globalization has turned transnational human capital into an increasingly important individual resource. Those who speak foreign languages, possess intercultural skills or have acquired experiences abroad clearly have an edge on globalized labor markets today. Using a multimethod approach, the book offers a rich empirical analysis addressing the question of how transnational human capital depends on social class, as well as how this relationship is brought about within families and educational institutions. This is a must-read for everyone interested in emerging new forms of educational inequalities in modern societies.

Hans-Peter Blossfeld, *European University Institute, Florence*

Once again, the innovative empiricist, Jürgen Gerhards, leads a pathbreaking project beyond the bounds of standard national models in the sociology of inequality and culture. Updating Bourdieu for a more complex, Europeanised and global society, Gerhards, Hans and Carlson convincingly mix survey data, interviews and media content analysis, to show how, when and why the children of elites use and reproduce what the authors term ‘transnational human capital’.

Adrian Favell, *Chair in Sociology and Social Theory, University of Leeds*



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Social Class and Transnational Human Capital

Due to globalization processes, foreign language skills, knowledge about other countries and intercultural competences have increasingly become important for societies and people's social positions. Previous research on social inequality, however, has dominantly focused on the reproduction of class structures within the boundaries of a particular nation-state without considering the importance of these specific skills and competences.

Within *Social Class and Transnational Human Capital* authors Gerhards, Hans and Carlson refer to these skills as 'transnational human capital' and ask to what extent access to this increasingly sought-after resource depends on social class. Based on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of class, they investigate this question via both quantitative and qualitative empirical analyses. In doing so the authors focus, among other examples, on the so-called school year abroad – that is, students spending up to a year abroad while attending school – a practice which is rather popular in Germany, but also quite common in many other countries. Thus, this insightful volume explores how inequalities in the acquisition of transnational human capital and new forms of social distinction are produced within families, depending on their class position and the educational strategies parents pursue when trying to prepare their children for a globalizing world.

An enlightening title, this book will appeal to undergraduate and postgraduate students, as well as postdoctoral researchers interested in fields such as sociology, social inequality research, globalization studies and educational studies.

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How Middle and Upper Class Parents Prepare Their Children for Globalization

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Parents Prepare Their Children
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Jürgen Gerhards, Silke Hans, and Sören Carlson



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1 Prologue

1.1 Setting the stage: transnational human capital and social inequality

In a world of self-contained, and often self-centered, nation-states, it would probably have been unthinkable that a nonnational could be appointed as director of one of the country's most important cultural institutions. And yet, this is exactly what happened in 2015 with the venerable British Museum in London and the future Humboldt-Forum in Berlin. The British Museum nominated a German art historian, Hartwig Fischer, as its new director after the previous director, Neil MacGregor, stepped down and was in turn appointed as one of the founding directors of the Humboldt-Forum, a new, globally oriented center for art and culture right in the heart of the German capital.

Admittedly, the image of a world consisting of more or less self-contained nation-states seems somewhat outdated, since the world in general – and the art world in particular – have moved ever closer together thanks to globalization processes. Nevertheless, one might ask what it is that allows some people, like Neil MacGregor, to change country and job with apparently little effort, while others, even with similar work experience, cannot. Of course, in the case of Neil MacGregor, one is tempted to see his nomination to the Humboldt-Forum as a result of his successful occupational past. In 1987, he became director of the British National Gallery, which was followed by his appointment as director of the British Museum in 2002. In both functions, he organized a number of highly acclaimed exhibitions and reached out to a mass audience via books and broadcasts. Commentators and journalists have repeatedly praised him for his curatorial, administrative, and commercial abilities, for his role as a public intellectual and for his diplomatic capacities. On top of it all, he speaks French and German fluently and is known for his personal charm and urbane manners – he is a citizen of the world.

And yet, it seems there is more to it. If we take a closer look at his biography, it appears that he was used to moving within unfamiliar and foreign surroundings from an early age. Neil MacGregor was born in 1946 in Glasgow into a well-to-do middle-class family; his parents were both doctors. As a boy, he attended the prestigious Glasgow Academy, a private school founded in 1845 with a long list of notable alumni. The family seems to have led an active cultural life – it's not for

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nothing that, according to an oft-told story, Neil MacGregor was turned towards art (and away from the family-approved professions of medicine, the church, or the law) by seeing a crucifixion painted by Salvador Dalí in the local Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum. The MacGregors also often spent their family holidays in France and Germany, thus giving their son the chance to get to know other cultures and societies from an early age. Furthermore, his grandparents had a strong affinity to Germany; they had German friends, and despite the two world wars, their sympathies for the country and its people remained to some extent. Given this family background, it does not come as a big surprise that, at the age of 16, he went to Hamburg. A host family was arranged for him via friends of friends and he attended school there while on temporary leave from his school in Glasgow. In an interview with a German newspaper, he remarked on this experience that, due to his family, it felt “completely normal for me to go to Germany.”¹

These early encounters with other countries and cultures were not to be his last; in fact, they prepared the ground for more. After school, he studied modern languages (French and German) at the University of Oxford and then went abroad to study philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, thus further deepening his foreign language skills and experiences abroad. Returning to the United Kingdom, he studied law at Edinburgh University, but decided after graduation to continue with art history at the Courtauld Institute of the University of London, marking his entrance into the art world.

Thus, it is not only his previous professional success that recommended him for the post of founding director of the Humboldt-Forum; Neil MacGregor is also equipped with what we call “transnational human capital.” By this, we refer to skills and credentials that allow people to act beyond the confines of their own nation-state or within transnationalized contexts that transcend national borders. Foreign language skills, which allow people from different societies to interact with each other, a knowledge of other countries, and intercultural competences – such as an openness to, appreciation of, and empathy for people from different cultures – are all part of transnational human capital. We regard such skills as “capital,” since it is a resource that gives those who possess it the chance to act transnationally and, potentially, to yield specific “returns.”

But transnational human capital is not intrinsically a useful or relevant resource. Imagine the world as a cluster of many self-contained units, as we did earlier. These would have no or only little contact with each other. Under such circumstances, it would not make much sense to learn other societies’ languages, customs, and sets of rules, because there would be no context in which to apply them. But, increasingly, this image of the world as a cluster of isolated societies no longer reflects reality. Due to how the world has developed since the 1970s, the conditions shaping the use of transnational human capital have changed fundamentally. The world has moved closer together, because interactions between different national societies and (world) regions have increased tremendously. This process, generally described as “globalization,” turns transnational human capital into an increasingly important resource, since it enables participation in an interconnecting world – or at least facilitates it enormously. Thus, those who possess such transnational

competences can make use of the new opportunity structure, while those who do not know or speak foreign languages, and do not have intercultural skills, are to a greater extent bound to their national “container.” Hence, the possession of transnational human capital is directly linked to the question of emerging new social inequalities.

However, the example of Neil MacGregor also shows that acquiring this form of capital probably depends to a huge extent on someone’s familial class position. Looking at the biographical sequence of family trips abroad, his time as a school-boy in Hamburg, his study of foreign languages at one of the most prestigious universities in the UK, followed by a period at a French elite institution, we can see a step-by-step process of transnational human capital accumulation that prepared the ground for his later career. But what chance do children from less advantaged social backgrounds have of acquiring transnational human capital?

This is the central question of our study, which analyzes the extent to which access to transnational human capital depends on social class origin and, furthermore, asks how such a relationship is brought about within families. We can assume that families who are equipped with abundant resources – that is, a high income, a high level of education, international contacts, and so forth – find it much easier to prepare their children for a globalizing world than families who occupy a lower-class position and have access to fewer resources. Due to the changing contextual conditions set by globalization processes, unequal resource endowments of this kind reproduce and exacerbate social inequalities in general, since chances for participation in a globalizing world are distributed unequally.

Transnational human capital can be acquired in very different ways. In our study, we concentrate on two examples that occur early on in life and can be regarded as highly influential for people’s subsequent life trajectories. The first example is preschool children’s attendance of daycare centers with bilingual programs and the second is the so-called school year abroad – that is, when high school students attend a school abroad for half or up to one year and then return to their country of origin to finish school there. For high school students from all over the world, participating in so-called international student exchange programs is a popular way to acquire transnational human capital. The major destination countries are English-speaking countries, such as Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and above all, the United States of America. This form of mobility is rather popular in Germany (Weichbrodt, 2014) and is quite common in many other countries, too. According to a 2011 Eurobarometer survey, the proportion of Europeans of 35 years of age or younger who had spent at least three months abroad for educational purposes during school varies between 0.8 percent in Greece and 11 percent in Luxembourg (Flash EB 319, own calculations). Today, a considerable number of young Europeans acquire transnational cultural capital by going abroad, boosting an evolving international education market in which the UK in particular has positioned itself strategically (see Brooks and Waters, 2015).

In our study, we will focus solely on the example of Germany. We will concentrate on analyzing German schoolchildren who go abroad to attend school for a period and those who attend bilingual day care in Germany. By focusing on

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preschool children's attendance of bilingual daycare centers and the school year abroad, we examine effective ways of acquiring transnational human capital. First, psychological research shows that younger children acquire new language skills more easily than older ones and adults; psychologists therefore speak of a "critical period" for second language acquisition (Meisel, 2011). Once this period is over it becomes considerably more difficult to learn a new language. Second, a stay abroad means a constant "immersion" of the child in a new linguistic and cultural environment. As a result, the high school student learns language skills as well as more general cultural codes and schemata 24 hours a day – something that is quite difficult to achieve at home (Baker, 1993). Finally, life course research has shown that decisions made early in life considerably influence future life paths and are hard to change later on (Breen and Jonsson, 2005). This principle of a continuous accumulation of educational advantages also holds true for the acquisition of transnational human capital – as several studies focusing on the example of student mobility have repeatedly shown (Finger, 2011; Parey and Waldinger, 2011; Netz, 2015; for further details, see Chapter 7).

This book develops its argument over seven chapters. We will now provide a brief synopsis of each of these.

In the remaining part of the first chapter we will outline the theoretical framework used throughout the book. This framework is inspired by the works of Pierre Bourdieu and builds on his theory of social class and social fields. At the same time, we modify his theoretical framework to some extent. Bourdieu's theory argues within a nation-state frame, neglecting the fact that globalization has significantly altered the basic parameters of social reproduction – a perspective that has generally been criticized for its inherent methodological nationalism. We define transnational human capital as a specific form of capital that comprises foreign language skills, cross-cultural competences, knowledge about other countries and institutions, and international experiences that allow individuals to act in social fields beyond their own nation-state as well as to act in transnationalized areas of society within the nation-state. Following Bourdieu's terminology, we distinguish between embodied, objectified, and institutionalized forms of transnational human capital, and we point out different ways through which transnational human capital can be acquired during the life course. Against this background, we then argue that spending a school year abroad and attending a bilingual day care are particularly effective ways of acquiring transnational human capital. The first chapter ends with a review of the current state of the research literature. This concerns studies on the relation between globalization processes and social inequality, analyses of educational inequalities, and previous research on attendance of educational institutions abroad by high school and university students.

As we have stated before, investing in transnational human capital is not a sensible strategy *per se*, but only under certain circumstances. In the second chapter, we focus on why and how the demand for transnational capital has grown over the last decades, proceeding in three steps. First, we argue that the growing demand for transnational capital results from both globalization processes and a societal redefinition of education, whereby transnational skills have become part of

educational and occupational profiles and cosmopolitan orientations have become a normatively desirable value. As a result of these processes, foreign language skills, international experiences, and intercultural competences are increasingly in demand.

Second, we assert that transnational human capital as a new kind of “asset” has also gained in importance because educational credentials that were previously the preserve of the few have become devalued due to educational expansion. Therefore, demonstrating that they have international experience and transnational competences is one way for the middle and upper classes to assert themselves in the ongoing positional competition between social classes and is a means to gain distinction. Thus, the acquisition of transnational human capital not only has an instrumental function, facilitating transnational communication, but also serves as symbolic capital by providing distinction vis-à-vis those who do not possess such capital.

Third, building on this theoretical argument, we present the results of a cross-national content analysis of job advertisements in daily newspapers, which we conducted in order to verify the expected long-term development of labor market demand for transnational human capital as well as to test for possible cross-sectional and cross-national differences. Our analysis covers a time span of 50 years (1960 to 2010) and shows that different forms of transnational human capital are increasingly sought after. Our content analysis is complemented by an analysis of cross-national survey data from the 2012 Eurobarometer on language use in the workplace. These data give further evidence that as one form of transnational human capital, foreign language skills are highly relevant in current labor markets.

In Chapter 3 we consider the extent to which school students’ access to transnational human capital is related to social inequality and what factors play a role in this regard. In so doing, we focus on two examples, each representing a specific opportunity for acquiring transnational human capital. The first is the so-called school year abroad, which we analyze using data from the German Socio-Economic Panel study (SOEP) and cross-national Eurobarometer (EB) data; the second example is preschool children’s attendance of daycare centers with bilingual programs, which we analyze based on data from a German youth survey study (AID:A). Our analyses extend beyond Germany since the EB data provide a comparative perspective on country differences in young Europeans’ chances to prepare themselves for the challenges of globalization via a school year abroad. With this analysis, we place additional focus on the macrostructural conditions for acquiring transnational human capital.

Our empirical analyses are based on Bourdieu’s theory of social class and his concept of capital as described in Chapter 1. Our assumption is that due to class-specific differences between families in terms of their endowment with economic, cultural, and social capital and the different educational aims and parenting practices that go along with social class positions, there are social inequalities with regard to the acquisition of transnational human capital. In addition, we examine the extent to which opportunity structures and conflicts within families are relevant.

The empirical results confirm our assumptions: middle- and upper-class children from families with sufficient economic resources and cultural capital are far more likely than other children to acquire transnational human capital early in life. While other factors – for example, parents’ commitment – are relevant as well, the families’ economic resources are of particular importance. While schooling in the German education system is generally free of charge, this is not the case for the acquisition of transnational human capital: the costs for acquiring this type of capital are considerable, which means that families’ income and wealth play a decisive role. Furthermore, there are also huge differences between European countries in young people’s access to transnational human capital, with the economically powerful highly globalized countries of Northern and Western Europe providing the best chances to participate in a student exchange program.

One of the shortcomings of educational studies based on quantitative methods consists in the fact that they are not able to show how class-specific characteristics are translated into concrete educational practices. This, however, is precisely the strength of qualitative studies. Accordingly, we have supplemented our quantitative analysis with a qualitative study, presented in Chapter 4, in order to reconstruct how family conditions – for example, endowment with different forms of capital – translate into class-specific parenting and educational practices, and how these practices result in (dis-)advantaged access to transnational human capital. By combining quantitative and qualitative methods we follow Max Weber’s seminal definition, who described sociology as a science, “which attempts the *interpretive* understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a *causal explanation* of its course and effects” (Weber, 1968, p. 4).

For our qualitative analysis, we conducted semi-structured interviews with parents from different social classes, some of whose adolescent children spent a school year abroad. Based on this, in Chapter 4 we reconstruct in some detail the processes and mechanisms leading to the acquisition of transnational human capital via a school year abroad. Our analysis proceeds in two steps: first, from a processual perspective, we look at how the topic of a school year abroad emerges in families, and how it ultimately becomes a reality in some families, depending on the families’ endowment with different forms of capital, class-specific child-rearing practices, and strategies for action. We thereby conceive of this process as a sequence of five steps: (1) emergence of the school year abroad as an issue within the families, (2) reaction to and negotiation of the topic by children and parents, (3) actually going away on the school year abroad, (4) parents’ visits to their children during the year abroad, (5) preparations for the child’s return and future expectations in relation to the year abroad.

Second, we complement our processual analysis by describing three types of families – “the transnationally accomplished,” “the excluded,” and “the ambitious” – which represent three distinct ways in which families from different class backgrounds handle the possibility of going to school abroad. This way, we show how the acquisition of transnational human capital in families with a higher class position is embedded within their general educational practices and how a higher

capital endowment can be converted into the concrete planning and execution of a school year abroad. The educational practices of families with a lower-class position, however, are not especially geared towards the acquisition of transnational human capital, and their lower endowment with different types of capital makes going on a school year abroad rather unlikely. Nevertheless, we can also identify how some of these families (the “ambitious”) enable their children to embark on a school year abroad, thus escaping the determinism that is thought to owe to their class position.

The acquisition of transnational human capital does not happen automatically, but needs to be organized and facilitated by specific providers. This is certainly true for long-term stays abroad by school students. Since state institutions in Germany have not taken much action in this regard, a field of non-state providers that function as “brokers” has developed. In Chapter 5, we describe how a social field of organizations formed and expanded that specialized in acting as intermediaries to place German schoolchildren in day schools and boarding schools abroad. Again, we draw on Bourdieu’s theory in this regard; this time, we utilize his concept of social fields. We start by reconstructing the historical development in which this specific field emerged and show how the “*illusio*” of providing a common good and the idea that school stays abroad promote mutual understanding among nations became increasingly replaced by the field’s commodification and the idea that school stays abroad are there to develop an individual’s human capital.

We then go on to point out the field’s inner differentiation, which currently consists of three specific field segments – the “basic segment,” the “choice segment,” and the “premium segment.” These segments are in a homologous relation to the class position of the clientele who demand such services. They differ in the price levels attached to their services, the supply of support, in their legal form, and in the specific shape the *illusio* takes. Thus, providers in the “basic segment” act as intermediaries for exchange program with relatively low prices; compared to the other two segments, social exclusiveness is lowest here. The “choice segment” additionally offers more expensive and customized programs. The “premium segment” acts predominantly as an intermediary for sending pupils to expensive boarding schools abroad. Thus, its clientele consists mainly of families with very high incomes and/or wealth so that, when comparing all three segments, we find here the highest degree of social exclusiveness.

While our analyses in the previous chapters focus on social inequalities in the acquisition of transnational human capital, we will discuss in Chapter 6 to what extent transnational human capital, once gained, leads to advantages for those who possess it, thus contributing to the reproduction of social classes. Secondly, we ask whether transnational human capital benefits society as a whole – above and beyond individual returns. In answering these questions, we mainly draw on the currently available research literature.

We first show that transnational human capital, once it is acquired, facilitates the acquisition of more transnational capital and thus has a tendency to accumulate over the life course. Secondly, transnational human capital can be

converted into various other types of capital. We point out the returns to transnational human capital in different dimensions – in terms of economic capital (e.g., more income or a better job), cultural capital (e.g., better chances to attend prestigious universities), social capital (e.g., having friends or a partner from a foreign country), and better chances for political participation in a transnational public sphere. Finally, there are indications that possessing transnational human capital goes along with specific symbolic returns, enabling those who have this type of capital to present themselves as a transnational elite and to distance themselves from others.

Thirdly, we summarize the results of studies that look at the possible effects of transnational human capital on societies as a whole. We do so with regard to two different aspects – namely, economic competitiveness and international understanding and peacekeeping. The current literature indeed indicates that transnational human capital may be beneficial in this respect.

Chapter 7 concludes the book. First, we summarize the different results of our analyses presented in the previous chapters. We then proceed by discussing potential political conclusions. Since it seems safe to assume that globalization will continue in the foreseeable future, transnational human capital will continue to be a central resource for societal participation. As a consequence, class differences in accessing transnational human capital may become more relevant. Our statistical analyses clearly demonstrate that the acquisition of transnational competences crucially depends on families' capital endowment, and on their economic capital in particular. This is due to the fact that public educational institutions have mostly remained uninvolved in transmitting transnational competences and have left the field to privately run educational providers and intermediaries. If the aim is to give more children and more children from lower social classes access to transnational human capital, it is important to define its acquisition as a key task of state educational institutions to a greater extent than is currently the case. We thus conclude our study with a short discussion on which educational policies can be deployed to make the acquisition of transnational human capital less dependent on the student's social class.

1.2 Key terms and theoretical framework

As the introductory remarks have already made clear, the theoretical framework of our study is inspired by the work of Pierre Bourdieu. We draw upon his capital and class theory, his concept of social space, and his field theory, but we will also modify and supplement this theoretical framework in some places. But let us first clarify what exactly we mean by transnational human capital and how it can be acquired.

Transnational human capital and how to acquire it

Transnational human capital is a specific form of human capital. Following the work of Gary Becker (1993), we understand human capital as knowledge, skills,

and qualifications that are tied to one person and are hence “embodied” and that allow people to act and be successful in different societal fields and above all on the labor market.

The concept is distinct from other forms of capital, which are not linked to one person (e.g., assets, equipment, or real estate). As a specific form of human capital, *transnational human capital* refers to knowledge, skills, and qualifications that enable a person to act *beyond* the nation-state in various social fields. Transnational human capital is important because other societies are structured differently: other languages are spoken; different legal systems apply; there are other institutions and other forms of informal communication. But at the same time, transnational human capital also allows people to participate in transnationalized areas of society *within* the nation-state, where transnational skills are required. Consider, for example, research teams whose members come from different nations or a job at the front desk of an international hotel.

Depending on the actual *content-related* skills in question, we can differentiate between different forms of transnational human capital (Koehn and Rosenau, 2002, p. 210). Elsewhere we have described multilingualism and the ability to speak English, the international lingua franca, as transnational linguistic capital (Gerhards, 2012; 2014). By contrast, a knowledge of other cultures and their systems of rules and habits, and the ability to act on that basis, is referred to as intercultural competence. And we can use the term “transnational juridical capital” to refer to the knowledge of the legal systems of other countries and the associated option to acquire a license to practice law in another jurisdiction. But transnational human capital may also include specific attitudes and values, such as an openness to and acceptance of other cultures. In this respect, cosmopolitan orientations form part of transnational human capital.

Furthermore, drawing on Bourdieu’s terminology, which we will explain in the next section in more detail, we can distinguish between different forms of transnational human capital. The *institutionalized* form of transnational human capital manifests itself particularly in educational qualifications. These include, for example, foreign high school and university qualifications and foreign language certificates. *Embodied* transnational human capital expresses itself in the ability to speak different languages in a style characteristic for the language in question, including the associated gestures and facial expressions. The embodied form of transnational human capital also includes a mastery of the rules of everyday communication (How do people greet each other? What clothes should you wear to what occasion? Who should go through an open door first?). Finally, transnational human capital also manifests itself in an *objectified* form: people who decorate their home with objects and accessories from other cultures or own a collection of foreign films or books signal their transnational orientation to the world around them with these cultural artifacts.

Table 1.1 uses examples to illustrate the various manifestations of transnational human capital.