

Social Class, Cultural Capital, and Elite Status Cultures among Blue-Collar Workers: The Unequal Benefits of Women in Higher Education from the Film *Educating Rita*

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How do cultural social class, cultural capital, and elite status cultures affect blue-collar workers aspiration for education? Are there unequal benefits between blue-collar and white-collar workers? Why do working-class women struggle to gain access to higher education? In the film, *Educating Rita*, director Lewis Gilbert examines the life of a young working-class woman dream to pursue English literature as a means to gain social mobility among elite status groups at Open University. Rita, a 26 year old blue-collar Liverpool hairdresser, meets her English tutor Dr. Frank Bryant in hopes that she would discover and experience true happiness in the United Kingdom. Dr. Bryant, a wealthy alcoholic academic who suffers from low self-esteem and confidence, would eventually fall in love with Rita's unwitty ability to adapt to academia life and her unwavering commitment to grow and change as a writer. The film *Educating Rita* is a unique example of how blue-collar workers are identified to be more independent, natural, and spontaneous people compared to white-collar workers. Generally, the lifestyle of blue-collar workers is often seen as less organized than white-collar workers in regards to student success (Bernstein, 1979, p. 296). Typically, education serves three primary functions: 1) conserving, inculcating and consecrating a cultural tradition and cultural heritage, 2) reinforces rather than redistributes the unequal distribution of cultural capital, and 3) legitimation function (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In other words, education institutions such as the Open University in London provides not just the transmission of technical knowledge and skills for college students like Rita but also socialization into the tradition towards a more fulfilling and promising life experiences.

So the question arises: does social class matter for women in higher education? One of the most common themes portrayed in the film is Rita's belief that wealthy class families are often more privileged and have better lives compared to working class or blue-collar families. The notion of privilege often "requires more than money alone; it requires a philosophy, a way

of living, and a justification” (Cookson & Persell, 1987, p. 4). The film reminded me of the book *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, where Annette Lareau believes that a family’s social class position predicts an individual school success and their ultimate life chances (Lareau, 2003, p. 29). Lareau (2003) highlights three reasons why social class matters for blue-collar workers: 1) the organization of daily life, 2) language use, and 3) interactions between families and institutions (p. 11). She claims that the economic position a family have in contemporary society is closely related to the differences in cultural logic of child rearing (Lareau, 2003, p. 31). Furthermore, the author suggests that working-class or blue-collar workers have a tendency to communicate more poorly compared to white-collar workers. In other words, the central difference between blue-collar and white-collar workers can often be associated to language and resources. Because of those differences, Lareau (2003) believes that blue collar workers such as Rita and Denny would often seek out advice from white-collar workers because they have difficulty comprehending the words that are mentioned by well-educated classes such as Dr. Bryant (p. 198). As such, Rita’s willful desire to ask Dr. Bryant for help in English literature is an example of how blue-collar workers are often disadvantaged in higher education.

Historically, in the United States, most educators have often ignored the relationship between social class and higher education (Lareau, 2003, p. 235). Past scholars have once argued that only race or ethnicity would determine who enters elite colleges and how they may cultivate their skills for the future. However, Lareau’s participant observation of 88 African-American and white families proved to educators that social location at birth plays a significant role in the routines of daily life. Lareau’s study illustrates how class position influences critical aspects of family life, such as, time use, language use, and kin ties. Generally, status and privilege are earned by individuals through intelligence, talent, effort, and other skills (Lareau, 2003, p. 275).

Children and adults must be successful in school in order to gain access to desirable positions. As a result, the social position of one's family origin has a profound implication for blue-collar life experiences and life outcomes (Lareau, 2003, p. 257). Compare to white-collar workers, the social position of blue-collar worker such as Rita and Denny are often more dependent upon the leadership of school professionals such as Dr. Bryant as shown throughout the film.

Aside from social class, another major theme that has emerged from the film is the idea that individuals are all socialized differently and shaped by different forms of life. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu believes that there are three types of capital that distinguish certain groups or institutions: 1) cultural capital, 2) social capital, and 3) human capital. Typically, cultural capital can create problems for the holders of economic or political capital as well as entrepreneurs. Bourdieu (1983) defines cultural capital as "a force inscribed in the objectivity of things so that everything is not possible or impossible" (p. 242). In other words, Bourdieu (1983) believes that cultural capital is a *vis insita* or *lex insita* that is acquired depending on the period, the society, and the social class. For instance, toward the end of the film, the academic committee of Open University in London would not fire or dismiss Dr. Bryant after teaching his English literature course drunk because of his high status or affiliation he has obtained at his institution. In other words, the higher the position an individual achieves in a social hierarchy, the greater the likelihood to obtain power and privilege in an organization or institution.

Another common theme that has emerged is the idea of 'elite status culture'. Historically, the classical theory of 'status' conceptualizes how an elite group monopolizes social institutions and organizations. For example, Weber (1946) note that elite status cultures in society are collectively bound together by personal ties and shared convictions that generate their own distinctive cultural traits, tastes, and styles. This concept is vividly exemplified in the scene

where Dr. Bryant had invited Rita to an informal party or gathering at his large mansion house in London. Though Rita thought the party would be an opportunity to meet some of Dr. Bryant's working-class or blue-collar friend, she was awestruck to discover that many his networks were all wealthy and educated classes. Eventually, Rita would decide to not attend the party in fears that she may not "fit in" with the white-collar group despite Dr. Bryant's invitation to provide her networking opportunity to meet elite individuals or groups within his own circle or group.

All in all, the film *Educating Rita* is an excellent example that deals with major concepts of social class, cultural capital, and elite status cultures. The movie clearly paints how schooling has the capacity to reproduce the unequal distribution of cultural capital in which the unequal distribution generates an informal status system. Moreover, the film displays how higher education institutions can serve as a gate-keeping function of social reproduction of elite that promotes collective identity, discipline, and a degree of asceticism. Rita's desire to study English literature as a blue-collar worker is an example of how schooling can play an important function in the development and maintenance of modern democratic society. Most functionalists would argue that the longer a student remains in school, the more the student will be able to integrate and prepare him or herself for modern society. Likewise, the more Rita studies and works hard in Dr. Bryant's tutorial, the more she would be able to change and grow as a writer and an intellect. As such, schooling serves as an important function of social cohesion and social order. Emile Durkheim once argued that cultivating morals through education and discipline is a vital part for society and for achieving social equality and life success. Hence, Horace Mann once concluded that: "Education, then beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men – the balance wheel of the social machinery" (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 28).

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