

Chapter Five

RETHINKING AUTHORITY

Cultural Capital

The notion that intelligence is a personal endowment or personal attainment is the great conceit of the intellectual class, as that of the commercial class is that wealth is something which they personally have wrought and possess.

John Dewey

PRIVILEGE AND POWER

Authority in American society is both unequally distributed and easily recognized. People without power work in assembly lines, behind long counters at banks, or in large corporate rooms crowded with rows of desks. In contrast, people with power work in spacious, private offices, usually with someone stationed outside to control access to the plush inner sanctum. Authoritative teachers and professors sit on one side of a desk, compliant students on the other.

According to popular American rhetoric, those issuing directives from plush sanctuaries are in their positions because they've proven themselves more worthy than others. They've earned good educations, confirming their intelligence. If they have large salaries and bank accounts, it's because they worked hard to earn them. The wealthiest and most powerful among us are generally assumed to be our smartest and most hard-working citizens.

For many of America's affluent, that description fits. Many of the wealthy are impressively intelligent and amazingly hard-working, and everyone has heard about whiz kids like Bill Gates who have taken ideas and built financial empires upon them. But critical theory reminds us that there is always more than one story if we look for it; there is always more than one reality in any human experience. While it's no doubt true that many have made fortunes in America by virtue of their hard work and wit,

it's also true that others have acquired their authoritative positions by far different means. Specifically, critical theory suggests that while some people earn their positions by virtue of what they do, others acquire their positions by virtue of what they have. That is, they are equipped with cultural capital (a term taken from the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu), a resource that nets them privileged positions, regardless of how much intelligence and ambition they may have—or lack. Cultural capital includes a variety of components that readers will surely recognize in the discussion that appears later in this chapter.

As a prelude to that discussion, however, I will detail a personal experience in order to demonstrate not only what cultural capital is, but also how it operates to privilege some over others. It's possible that the tale will trigger unhappy memories of similar experiences for many readers, memories of times when others judged them and found them wanting. Or, conversely, perhaps others will read the narrative and begin to wonder if they have ever mistaken the benefits of their own cultural capital for evidence of their own superiority.

In either case, rethinking our own experiences may be distinctly uncomfortable. It's worth the effort, however, because such honest analysis can yield an intensely personal understanding of how privilege is sometimes purchased, rather than earned. And, in a culture that assumes that we all get what we deserve, such understanding is useful both for those who have power and for those who lack it.

THE RIGHT STUFF

Many years ago, I sat across a mahogany desk from a middle-aged man in his office, the president's office of a college preparatory school catering to children of the moneyed. Every aspect of the office reflected that fact: plush carpeting, hushed ivory walls, original artwork, windows overlooking a flowering manicured campus. I was there, I told him, to find out why I was fired—or rather, in the euphemistic language appropriate to the environment, why my contract was not renewed.

I watched the flush rise from his crisply starched, brilliant-white cotton collar up past his scholarly spectacles and through his thinning, impeccably groomed hair. With barely controlled fury at the audacity that allowed me to think I had a right to require an explanation of him, he gave me a tight, tidy answer: "Because," he spat at me, "people like you are a dime a dozen."

People like me?

According to student evaluations, I was a talented, caring, and creative teacher. Students and parents alike had launched a campaign for me to chaperon the school's annual summer tour to Europe. I had stacks of notes from students praising my work. I had spent countless Friday nights shepherding students safely through ski trips with drunken bus drivers, and countless Saturday nights preventing female boarding students from climbing out their windows to visit the boys' dorm. But—having never even looked at my classroom, one floor above us, in the three years I'd been teaching there—this man wasn't thinking about my work.

He meant that I grew up in a local town on the wrong side of the tracks. He meant that my degrees were not from Ivy League schools. He meant that my long blond hair was not subject weekly to the ministrations of a stylist favored by fashionable local women. He meant that my name had too many syllables, and it had consonant combinations that were unfamiliar to him, and I was not Protestant.

I knew what he meant because I had already learned it as a teenager working as a "mother's helper" in homes where I was routinely referred to as "the girl" and expected to eat alone in the kitchen. And, in one memorable case, to iron the father's boxer shorts.

Of course, no administrator could possibly fire a teacher for having the wrong sort of name and hairstyle. Something else must have happened; of course it did. But the specific triggering event only magnifies how little success and failure, power and powerlessness, can be related to intelligence and hard work, and how much they can depend on far different standards.

BOBBY

I was fired because of Bobby, and I have never for a second regretted it. Decades later, in fact, when I studied with the superbly humane philosopher Maxine Greene, I realized that if I hadn't gotten myself fired I would have had to be ashamed of myself for the rest of my life.

Bobby was a sophomore when I met him. He was resident smart-aleck in one of my classes, ring leader of the class clowns in a class overflowing with comic talent and seriously short on intellectual curiosity and energy. He made my life miserable, and he sent me scurrying to every book I could find on group dynamics to figure out how to turn around the insurgent class climate he orchestrated. The books were no help.

To make a very long story short, Bobby and I became friends when we started encountering each other every weekend in the dormitory where I had an apartment. When I was on duty, monitoring the dorm, I spent a lot of time reading in the lounge, where students could drop by with questions on school work, or on whether they could leave, or on how to deal with life's habitual roller coasters. Though he lived nearby, at home with his mother, I soon learned Bobby spent all the time he could at the school, and it wasn't because of love of learning. His divorced mother was an alcoholic who abused him emotionally and verbally, and he counted every minute away from home a happy one.

As our hours of conversation mounted, the trust level between us grew, and we learned we had things in common. He, like me, was not in the same social class as the vast majority of the students. He was, in fact, a "scholarship student," one of the handful of kids the school supported to demonstrate its non-elitism. (I myself had been hired not through a regular application process, but as an emergency mid-year replacement for an unexpected retirement; I was certainly qualified, and so the school accepted me—not having time to seek someone qualified *and* "suitable.") His suicidal thoughts were familiar to me because, when I was younger, I had spent many hours in a dark room listening to music wishing my life would just go away and leave me alone. We became, eventually, friends and allies.

When I suggested to him that he start earning As instead of Ds and Fs in my class, he agreed to try, and exceeded even my high expectations. In

class, he herded his buddies into interesting conversations with me instead of against me. When I suggested to him that he try earning As in his other classes as well, he did. In fact, when the school decided to kick him out, he was a straight A student.

But he showed up on campus drunk. Once. And the administration needed to make an example of someone—and Bobby suited their purpose just fine.

Student drinking, in a school where teens carried wallets stuffed with twenties, was a serious problem. Hoping to alleviate the situation, the administration had been waiting to find the right student to sacrifice in order to make a point about consequences. They caught John, but his father was a big contributor, and the same with Jane and others. But Bobby? No money there; no name revered in local halls of commerce or in our newspaper's social pages; not likely to become a big name, a big buck contributor down the road. So they nailed him, and sent his case—that of the obviously ungrateful ne'er-do-well—to the campus disciplinary board.

Which is how I got in trouble. I personally visited and pleaded ardently with every member of the board, "Not *this* boy, please. Not **THIS** boy." It will, I told them, ruin him. It will, I told them, undo months and months and months of rehabilitative effort on my part and Bobby's part. It will, I told them, waste precious human potential.

But they kicked him out anyway.

And I descended upon the dean in a fury, charging him with hypocrisy and ethical cowardice. And the episode made clear to the authorities that I was, alas, a troublemaker who didn't know how to go along to get along. And, after enough time had passed, I was fired.

But, six months after *his* dismissal, Bobby was in a mental institution.

WHAT BOBBY AND I LACKED

For twelve years of schooling, every morning students proclaim a belief that America is about "liberty and justice for all." As I've noted, we learn early that America is a meritocracy, where people get what they have

earned. If they work hard, they get money or grow up to be president of something, maybe even the country. If they're lazy, then they become poor and lead spare lives of hardship because they don't have the ambition, or maybe intelligence, to make their lives better. In any case: whatever they've got, it's what they deserve.

However pervasive this popular wisdom (and however comfortable for the privileged to believe), the critical theorist urges us to rethink it. If we look at the issue of who has what from a different angle, we uncover considerable validity in another saying, popular in other quarters: "Them what has, gets." Maybe Bobby and I deserved our fate; but then again, maybe other factors came into play.

CULTURAL CAPITAL

Critical theorists suggest that the assortment of characteristics they refer to as cultural capital—including but decidedly not limited to towering bank accounts—enables some people (like the school president and the disciplinary board members) to attain certain positions and the power to determine the fate of other people (like Bobby and me). The theorists suggest that often we are sorted into groups-with-power and groups-without-power based not on how smart we are or how hard we work, but on very different characteristics: how we look, speak, and move; what we already do and don't know; what we do and don't value; where we go and don't go; whom we know or don't know. Having a certain constellation of characteristics, a certain cultural capital, enables holders of the "right stuff" to acquire power, while lacking it shuts others out of the ranks of the powerful.

For example, when the president said that people like me were a dime a dozen, he meant that few people held his sort of cultural capital, the "right" sort—Ivy League degrees, a moneyed background, a pricey wardrobe, the ability to chat about restaurants in cities from coast to coast. Many, however, shared my cultural capital—degrees from local colleges, knowing how to juggle bills so that there would be enough money to pay the rent, skill in making eight mix-and-match pieces of clothing do as a wardrobe,

the modest idea that going for pizza constitutes having dinner out. When the disciplinary board dismissed Bobby, they chose him because other students had cultural capital which he lacked: the right name, the right street address, the right financial resources, the connections to assure him of a lucrative job after college.

Have one set of cultural capital, and it buys you power. Have one of countless other sets, and it persuades the powerful that they have the right to determine your fate—that you deserve no more than you've got already. I still believe that Bobby and I were removed from the school because we lacked the right cultural capital. We lacked the proper credentials to belong, really, and those credentials had nothing to do with our intelligence, ambition, or ability (he was earning As, after all, and I was earning praise from students and parents). And, to compound my lack of appropriate cultural capital, I clearly didn't know my place. I told anyone who would listen that Bobby was being punished not for drinking, but for being different from the majority of his schoolmates in all the wrong ways.

School authorities looked at us both and shook their heads: "Here are these impostors, lucky enough to dwell among us, and yet they don't know enough to count their blessings and just follow along, quietly. There's just nothing you can do with *some* people." Except, of course, exile them: send them back to where they belong.

OUR CULTURAL TEMPLATE

Momentarily, I'll get to greater detail on which cultural capital is valued in schools. But first, it's worth asking how and why we accept such a sorting system in the first place, consciously or not. After all, anyone can have a good idea no matter what clothes he might be wearing, no matter what her language or dialect. So why do we value one particular set of characteristics over others? Why should wearing this kind of clothing or that, speaking this way or that, determine whether we are to wield power or to suffer the power of others?

The answer is that as a culture, we have tacitly endorsed a particular template as representing the "average American," and that template has

become our ideal, the "right" way to look, and sound, and live. We have absorbed an ideal so pervasive in our culture that it has become simply a part of *the way things are*, something we never stop to think about or to question. Thanks to positivism and religion and science and mass media and a historic sense of moral superiority, we are a culture that believes (as many other cultures do) that we alone have identified the one *right* way to live, to speak, to act, to believe. Anyone who doesn't fit what's represented as the norm doesn't belong. Anyone who varies lacks "the right stuff" and belongs in the group without power.

Theoretically, it is the job of schools to make sure that students have the stuff they need to be successful. As discussed in chapter one, the goal of American schools has long been to function as a melting pot, erasing differences among individuals by processing them in the mold of standardized public schooling, involving not only academics but *Americanization*. "This is what *Americans* eat; this is how they sound; this is what they wear; this is what they value." Anything else is un-American and, since this is the greatest nation in the world, inferior.

So strong is our commitment to the rightness of our vision that we have all but wiped Native American culture from the face of the earth. And, in another spectacle of national hubris, we once forced Puerto Rican schools to celebrate American holidays and Puerto Rican teachers to teach Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican children in English. Even if you're not living in America, we think you'll be a lot better off if you act more "American" than whatever you are.

The template of "an American," however, is taken from images far removed from the daily experience of the majority of American families, and the public school has never been able to erase what are largely characteristics of class. While June Cleaver was wearing pearls to putter in the kitchen, my own mother was sloshing around my dad's dairy in her knee-high rubber boots. My grandmother spoke only Polish until she died, despite Walter Cronkite's nightly English intonations, and every Sunday I suffered through two homilies at church, one in Polish and then one in English. While the "average American" was reading the stock reports in daily newspapers, my Irish father-in-law was spending his nights studying accounting with a generous nun, who shared his hope that he would one

day own the warehouse floors he spent his days sweeping. I never read about or saw pictured in my textbooks anyone mentally challenged, but all the kids in my hometown knew that the ever-visible Crazy Louie was someone who would not hurt us and who deserved courteous treatment.

In other families and areas, less fortunate than the homey neighborhood of extended families where I grew up, children routinely wore hand-me-downs and went to bed hungry. They lived crowded into one-room hovels. They saw their fathers, who worked impossibly long hours in mines or in fields, almost never. Nor did they see much of their mothers, who scrubbed other people's floors or laundry all day, and who were likely to have left school after the first few grades to help their families by picking cotton or coal.

Most "average" Americans have never lived the lifestyle portrayed as "average" in our newspapers, magazines, textbooks, or television shows. Still, that is the way we are "supposed" to be. (Many novels, like Stephen Crane's *Maggie*, *A Girl of the Streets*, have painted a different picture, of course—but such books are rarely urged upon the "average" American.) Public images of neat women wearing pearls, men in suits behind desks, well-scrubbed apple-cheeked children, and rooms of coordinated, pristine furniture (never, of course, draped in plastic or polyester for protection) have effectively obscured the more commonplace and less attractive reality. That reality—that a whole lot more of us live far differently than the image presented as typical—is as true today as it was when I was young.

In the butcher shop in the New York neighborhood where my dad's family once lived, young and old butchers and customers alike still converse more often in Polish than in their heavily accented English, and pigs' feet are still prominently displayed in the meat case. In other areas of the city, newer generations of immigrants speak in a cacophony of assorted Asian and Pacific languages. I know plenty of people who have trouble paying the rent on minimal housing, never mind mortgages on individual spacious homes.

Men disappear from their homes, tired of telling dependent wives and children that they didn't find jobs again today. Single mothers work multiple jobs trying to support their children, left home alone with the

mother's most ardent wishes that it could be otherwise. For decades, educational researcher and activist Jonathan Kozol has been documenting the immoral and apparently eternal suffering of countless American children living in poverty for countless reasons. Any of his works thoroughly discredits the myth of a universally happy and innocent American childhood. Meanwhile, despite volumes of evidence to the contrary, recent politicians like Dan Quayle and Newt Gingrich have stubbornly denied the documented, ugly reality and worked to maintain the fiction of a two-parent, hard-working, financially stable family as the core American experience.

The people who live and work and dream in America, including the children, rarely resemble the popular myths about them. And, the reality is that while all of America's schoolchildren come with plenty of capital from their own culture (with lilting phrases in foreign languages, with games and songs from non-Christian religions, with an enthusiasm for traditional foods bearing no resemblance to turkey, with unique ways of deferring to or of challenging adults), children who don't reflect the standard cultural template pay a heavy price for their uniqueness. In schools, they are judged on multiple markers having nothing to do with their intellectual capacity, and they are routinely found wanting.

The critical theorist calls attention to the fact that what is wanting are certain kinds of cultural traits, or cultural capital, rather than intelligence, creativity, or potential. Among these are mastery of standard English, accumulation of privileged knowledge, and patterns of interacting.

ISSUES OF LANGUAGE

Though I don't remember what prompted the incident, I do remember being in seventh grade and running into Miss Williams's room with some friends, all of us bursting to tell her the most exciting news *ever*. Breathless, we clamored "Miss Williams, Miss Williams! You won't believe this! You should of been there. . . ." As our news started pouring from us in our grinning excitement, she interrupted with a stern admonition: "Girls, please: You mean should *have*, not should *of*." We

left soon after, her impromptu grammar lesson having pricked the balloon of our passion.

In large part because positivists have *a* right answer to everything, the focus of much teaching is to find the places where children are *wrong*, or deficient, and to fix them—to pinch and pull and tug at them until they more closely resemble the national template. In the area of language, this effort is very nearly obsessional. The *form* of a child's remark routinely outranks, by far, its content.

Lucy Calkins, specialist in the teaching of writing to children, frequently tells an anecdote that poignantly reveals this teacherly disposition. She shows audiences of teachers a piece of writing from a child, telling about his grandfather's death. The text is full of errors—sentence fragments, spelling, punctuation—all the errors that make English teachers grind their teeth. When Calkins asks teachers where they would start in responding to the writing, teachers usually fiercely dispute whether it's best to start with sentence errors (the most "serious") error, or to start with spelling, arguably the easiest to correct. When the teachers finish planning their grammatical crusade against the child, Calkins quietly notes that she herself might respond, "I'm very sorry to hear your grandfather died. It's obvious you loved him very much."

It's true, of course, that at this moment it is necessary to master standard English to attain status in American society. Anyone who says in an interview "I ain't afraid of hard work" is unlikely to be hired for anything except brute or rote work, no matter their intelligence, their ambition, or their eagerness to excel and advance. In our national template, the use of standard English is generally thought to signify intelligence. Speak the "right" way, and you are deemed smart enough to enjoy responsibility; speak any other, and you are deemed stupid and pushed back to the bottom rung of the ladder, where you obviously belong. A current national obsession to proclaim English the official language of the United States and to outlaw bilingual education speaks volumes about this perception.

So does standardized testing, where being able to discriminate between *who* and *whom*, and *which* and *that* is thought to signal whether or not one is smart enough to go on to college. This perception is absurd, of course, since most of us learn our speech patterns from our parents and others who

surround us as we grow. By the time she was five, for example, my daughter had learned to say on occasion that her brother had "soggy drawers." Because this was a favorite phrase of mine, I never misread her parroting as genius; I never confused her linguistic experience with her intelligence, though that is a habit of the educational world. There, however, the misinterpretation is more likely to suggest idiocy than genius: if a child doesn't sound like the teacher, he or she is thought to be stupid.

However much anyone may believe that smarter people use "more correct" English, most linguists will tell anyone who will listen that *no* language or dialect is inherently superior to any other. *Any* language form people continue to use is adequate, because its continued use indicates that it meets the needs of the speakers. There's nothing *wrong* with saying "I ain't"—unless one is measuring against some ideal template. It's an *alternative* way of expressing an idea, not a useless corruption. The National Council of Teachers of English endorsed this position in the 1970s, and reformers like linguist Geneva Smitherman are actively campaigning to advance respect for alternative language styles.

This is not, however, a position endorsed by most teachers (and most power holders). In a positivist environment, the focus is on doing things the one *right* way, not on alternative ways of seeing and doing, not on the variety of legitimate perspectives that constructivists endorse. There are countless Miss Williamsses to signal to children they are wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, *wrong* nearly every time they open their mouths. Because they are corrected—told they fall short of an ideal—over and over, they soon learn an effective strategy for avoiding this humiliating judgmental process: silence. They learn to keep quiet, knowing that the teacher isn't listening to their *ideas* anyway. And then, of course, their silence marks them as lacking ideas, being dim-witted or slow. It's a lose/lose proposition for the child.

Many will protest, as student teachers I worked with did, that it *is* the job of the school to teach standard English, so that children can gain acceptance in mainstream (read prosperous) America. This is true, and it explains why standard English is sometimes referred to as "cash English" in some cynical circles. But, as I told the student teachers repeatedly, there is a difference between teaching a "standard" version of a language and a

“correct” version of a language. A “standard” is a form we all agree to in order to facilitate living.

Because there are “standard” size windows, architects can draw plans without checking over and over and over again on what window manufacturers are doing these days. Because in the United States the standard of road measurement is miles rather than kilometers, we can drive from state to state and read signs that offer us useful information in a consistent format. (Though soon, we will be moving to the metric system in order to bring our idiosyncratic measurements in line with a more global standard.) Because we have “standard” English, outside my region I know I can use the phrases “Isn’t it?” or “Don’t you agree?” as tag questions and have a listener understand my intent—unlikely if I used our alternative regional term “haina?”

Standard English is, no doubt, useful—but that’s all it is. Useful, not sacred. Many educators, linguists in particular, plead with purists to consider what it is they are requiring of children forbidden to speak the language of their homes. In asking children to master a new, *correct* speech form, we ask them to accept that their home speech, the speech of their mothers and grandmothers and fathers and neighbors, is inferior. We ask them to accept that important people, people in their cultural world, talk *wrong*. They sound stupid. In short, we ask children to stop sounding like members of the community they call home and to start sounding like members of a hypothetical middle class white world. Instead of sounding like, and so identifying themselves with, their mothers and grandmothers, they are asked to sound like, and identify with, the teacher (whom they may not even like or respect or believe), or the guy who reads the Wall Street report on the evening news.

Critical theorists call attention to what children are asked to sacrifice and to their frequently resulting silence. Rather than suffer correction after correction, each yet another sign of deficiency and inferiority, children often choose to distance themselves from their schooling in order to maintain their identities in their home communities. As constructivists who believe in multiple realities, many critical theorists argue that this needn’t be an either/or situation.

They say, "Let's call standard English what it is: cultural capital. Let's admit that it buys things in this society— jobs, higher education, respect. But let's also honor the unique language of the home community and let the teacher learn about the student's home language while the student learns about the standard. Meanwhile, let's try to move toward a society where we enjoy our diversity rather than scorn it, where the society pays more attention to the message a speaker offers than to its form."

PRIVILEGED KNOWLEDGE

When I applied to the college I eventually attended, it was because my father gave me two choices, and two choices only. He would pay, he said, for a local college because its higher tuition would be offset by my living at home. Or, I could go to a state university, where the lower tuition meant he could afford room and board. I was the first member of my family to attend college; what did any of us know about how to make this critical decision? The local college wasn't famous, but it *was* a good, and expensive, one. The state university was widely respected. We knew I'd get a good education at either place. Why look beyond those two choices?

I got my first clue about our miscalculation years later, when the school president pointed out my "dime a dozen" status. And my learning about academic elitism eventually culminated when I earned an Ivy League doctorate and saw how differently my job applications were greeted, how differently I am now perceived and treated. I am the same person, I think, just as intelligent and just as hard working as I was when I held two degrees from a non-Ivy school—but my doctorate has a sort of halo that seems to outshine other doctorates from other institutions.

For all our talk about anyone being able to do anything, American society is terribly elitist, and an enormous part of that elitism is enabled by academic snobbery. Knowing the difference between applying to colleges like Wellesley or Amherst and to "Hometown College" is a privileged piece of information, held primarily by people who have attended schools like the former. In fact, even when I decided to pursue a doctorate, I still was unfamiliar with the names of truly prestigious institutions. I learned

the name of the impressive school I eventually earned my degree from only when my intensely supportive dean—whose own doctorate was from Yale—suggested it to me.

Overworked guidance counselors, whose job it is to know the difference and to help students make choices based on ability, routinely fail to mention high status colleges and universities to students of a certain background, on the theory that they “can’t afford them, anyway.” As a result, many capable students, not knowing the difference, apply to community colleges (if they apply to college at all) because they don’t know they could do otherwise, or what ultimate difference their choice might make in the future. Meanwhile, students at pricey private schools (sent there primarily by parents who themselves went to similar schools) receive an extensive education about premier institutions and how to get into them.

It may be true that “You can get a good education anyplace,” definitely including thousands of quality community colleges, but the reality is that a degree constitutes a kind of cultural capital, and a degree from one place will “buy” the holder a great deal more than a degree from someplace else. Given the hegemony of America’s privileged, most of America’s young people either don’t know the relationship between colleges and the opportunities that they will or won’t encounter later, or else their constructed consciousness keeps them from applying to elite schools on the grounds they know they don’t belong there. In this self-selecting process, young people as smart as any Ivy League graduate deny themselves a chance to compete for high status. They lack privileged information about elite institutions and the advantages they confer.

Similarly, many of my students don’t know that they have rights as citizens. For example, I routinely require students to attend school board meetings, and when I make the assignment they frequently ask “Are we *allowed*?” Here, too, constructed consciousness tells them they don’t belong, they have no voice, the business of governing is not properly a concern of theirs. Oh, yes, of course, they know they have the right to vote, but no one has ever explained to them the relationship between campaign money and political success, or how letter-writing or boycotting or demonstrating might affect political decisions. No one has urged them to

have a political memory beyond the seven days preceding election day. Despite twelve years of pledging allegiance to the flag, they don't understand American government; they don't *know* in any real way why and how they might work to influence politics and political decisions.

Because the experience of many students is so different from that assumed in our national template, there are countless pieces of privileged knowledge they don't have, and so countless opportunities for others to judge them stupid and unworthy. They don't know that every human being deserves respectful treatment from others, whatever their sex or job or bank account may be. They don't know how to invest money to make money, or how to minimize the taxes they pay. They don't know that their permission is required for actions schools may want to take in relation to their children, or that they have every right to walk into a public school classroom and ask a teacher questions about how a child has been treated.

Because they don't move in certain circles, there's a lot they don't know. Their ignorance is neither bliss, nor a sign of stupidity. Instead, it is a form of blindness imposed by their class status that keeps them from acting on their own behalf or even misleads them into acting against their own best interest. When it comes to information about accessing institutions that confer privilege and power, what many people don't know—their lack of a certain kind of cultural information—can and does hurt them.

PATTERNS OF INTERACTING

When I taught graduate school in New York City, I was privileged to make friends with several African-American students who weren't offended by my nearly total ignorance of their culture. (At the time, I still suffered from a positivist hangover and hadn't yet begun studying other cultures in earnest.) Instead of scorning my ignorance, they undertook my education.

I learned from them that if a tall, young black man happens to be walking toward a single white person on a sidewalk, the white person invariably crosses to the other side of the street. White people also shy away from groups of loud, laughing young blacks. The simple traits of height, age, race, and volume are routinely interpreted by whites to be threatening, to

signal an inclination to perpetrate violence. My towering male friends were both saddened and angered by this perception, but they could do nothing about their height and they didn't see that sounding more subdued, more like the white template and less like their cultural selves, made much sense.

I also learned an important cultural lesson from a Korean woman I once had in a writing class. Though she had a lovely, delicate oral style in English, she felt her written English needed to be more "correct." Because this event also happened when I was still influenced by a positivist perspective, I looked at her writing and agreed it needed improvement. Subsequently, I set about trying to teach her what a thesis is and how paragraphs support a thesis by providing support for a single idea, how writing stays focused.

No matter how much time we both invested, however, her essays remained long rambling tracts without any sign that she was making progress toward tightly woven exposition. At least I had the good sense at the time not to confuse her rambling with stupidity. I knew she was intelligent because of my conversations with her, but something certainly seemed to be getting in the way of her understanding my instruction.

Too late, I learned that what I perceived as "rambling" served in her culture as courtesy. The directness I was asking for, the sharply focused, clearly supported ideas, was for her the cultural equivalent of telling someone to "Shut up!" rather than asking "May I have a moment to tell you how it looks to me, please?" Cushioning a sharp remark with blunted language is, in fact, typical of Asian culture. In Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses*, for example, a character from a relatively privileged background teaches a character from much poorer circumstances that the equivalent of "Mind your own business!" in polite Chinese is "In this matter you need not concern yourself on my behalf."

Because courtesy was one of the most prized virtues in my Korean student's culture, my directions to "Get to the point!" equated to asking her to sound like a rude and ignorant oaf—though of course I mistakenly read her continually roundabout discourse to mean she was unable to comprehend my instruction. To compound the problem, she had no way of telling me what I was asking of her: criticizing or complaining to an

instructor would constitute another act of unconscionable rudeness on her part. Instead, she politely and quietly accepted my idiotic and endless repetition of the same advice, which was to do something her culture would soundly condemn.

Children from cultures other than the theoretical mainstream often come with habits that are misread by their teachers, just as I erred in the case above. Our misreadings are nearly the equivalent of judging the taste of French bouillabaisse by how closely it resembles American beef stew. Different ingredients and intentions need to be interpreted differently, but we rarely take care to discriminate so thoughtfully among student behaviors.

Teachers often have a menu of desirable traits they judge all students by. Boys should be outspoken, energetic, irrepressible within bounds, smudged and rumpled, but not smelly. Girls should be modest, reticent, generous, neat, and squeaky clean. All children should follow directions without question, be dedicated to any schoolwork presented, and eager to answer the teacher's questions. All children should also profess love for their parents, country, school, and God. They should be able to look the teacher in the eye, and they should promptly volunteer in any area the teacher requests. *Ad infinitum*.

The trouble is, as is true with standard English and as I unwittingly asked of my Korean student, the behavior a teacher expects, or even demands, may be directly in conflict with behaviors valued or forbidden in a student's home culture. In *Ways with Words* (1983), for example, Shirley Brice Heath explains how children from a certain culture did badly in their English class because they appeared to lack any imagination. Asked to write "a story," they resorted over and over again to well-worn Biblical tales. To the educational world, the children gave every indication of lacking any shred of imagination, perhaps because they were "culturally deprived."

When Heath studied the community, however, she found it a deeply religious one that stressed both honesty and faith to the literal word of God, found in the Bible. As tots, the children memorized "stories" from the Bible, giving great care to being able to repeat them exactly, word for word—an ability highly prized in their community. Their religion taught

them that dishonesty was unacceptable under any circumstances, and frowned on fiction as a form of untruth. As a result, the children were paralyzed when in school they were asked to write "stories," which to them constituted a form of lying. Instead, they offered the behavior prized by adults at home, and repeated the Bible stories they'd taken such care to learn verbatim. And the school misread their obedience to a strong, highly principled home community as lack of imagination—dullness.

This letter from an unidentified Native American mother to her child's American schoolteacher, quoted by William Ayers in *To Teach* (1993), poignantly demonstrates how a mismatch in cultural values may cause children to be devalued in schools:

Too many teachers, unfortunately, seem to see their role as rescuer. My child does not need to be rescued; he does not consider being Indian a misfortune. He has a culture, probably older than yours; he has meaningful values.

He is not accustomed to having to ask permission to do the ordinary things that are part of normal living. He is seldom forbidden to do anything; more usually the consequences of an action are explained to him, and he is allowed to decide for himself whether or not to act.

He has been taught, by precept, that courtesy is an essential part of human conduct and rudeness is any action that makes another person feel stupid or foolish. Do not mistake his patient courtesy for indifference or passivity.

He doesn't speak standard English, but he is in no way "linguistically handicapped." . . . He and the other Indian children communicate very well, both among themselves and with other Indians. They speak "functional" English, very effectively augmented by their fluency in the silent language, the subtle, unspoken communication of facial expressions, gestures, body movement, and the use of personal space.

You will be well advised to remember that our children are skillful interpreters of the silent language. They will know your feelings and attitudes with unerring precision, no matter how carefully you arrange your smile or modulate your voice. They will learn in your classroom, because children learn involuntarily. What they learn will depend on you.

Will he learn that his sense of his own value and dignity is valid, or will he learn that he must forever be apologetic and "trying harder" because he isn't white? Can you help him acquire the intellectual skills he needs without at the same time imposing your values on top of those he already has? (40-41)

With good reason, many mothers, like this one, fear that their children will be misunderstood and misjudged by their teachers. While they may not use this vocabulary to express their fear, they are in fact worrying that the cultural capital their children take to school, like knowledge of the Bible or of different ways of communicating, will be discounted, while their lack of privileged cultural capital, like knowledge of behaviors the teacher expects and values, will lead authorities to judge them innately inferior.

CULTURAL CAPITAL AND THE SORTING MACHINE

Because it is the job of schools to identify and nurture various levels and kinds of talent among children, schools have nearly countless sorting practices: grades, ability groups, tracks, ranges of test scores, report card grades. Theoretically, children receive the grades and placements they have "earned" by virtue of their ability and application. The reality, however, is far different. Their particular cultural background has far more to do with how children fare in schools than does their ability.

The next chapter, on how children are sorted unfairly and on how they resist sorting, explores the relationship between cultural capital and the fate of students in America's public schools.