Reproducing cultural capital
Generation gap or education gap?

Keith Roe In his article 'Een cultuurkloof tussen de generaties?' (*Boekmancahier* 17, 1993) Frits van Wel presents a rich empirical study of the cultural styles of youth in The Netherlands. While I fully concur with his conclusion that there is today no marked generational conflict in these respects in Western Europe, the analysis upon which this conclusion is based tends to obscure more than it reveals. In this article I will argue: 1. that van Wel's discussion of generational conflict and the competing influence of parents and peers ignores a large body of international research evidence pertaining to these questions, 2. that his model of the role played by the peer group in the process of cultural transmission is essentially circular and 3. that his analysis is derived from a superficial reading of the theoretical framework provided by Bourdieu, the result of which is the failure to identify the central mechanism of cultural reproduction.

Parents, peers and generational conflict: the evidence

In his review of the field Coleman (1980:1) identified two aspects of adolescence that are especially confusing: first, adolescent behaviour is frequently paradoxical (e.g. conformity may co-exist with rebellion); and second, there is often a great discrepancy between media images of young people and the actual behaviour of most adolescents. The inevitable result is contradictory characterizations of youthful development. Moreover, he argued, not only does adolescent development inherently encompass such ambivalence, nowhere is it greater than in the process of achieving independence from adults. 'There is nothing more frustrating for adults than having to deal with an adolescent who is at one moment complaining of having parents who are always interfering, and the next bitterly protesting that no one takes any interest in him.' (Coleman, 1980:64). Many researchers have had serious doubts about the validity of the whole generation gap/youth rebellion concept, even in the context of the 1960's. Pearson (1988:237) e.g. argues that although historical myth proposes that our contemporary problems are a break with the past, historical realism shows that they are not. He demonstrates that, across the centuries, 'there are truly astonishing similarities' in some aspects of youthful behaviour, and that, 'we have seen the same rituals, the same mockery against elders and authorities, and the same antagonism towards outsiders as typical focuses of youthful energy and mischief'. (Pearson, 1988:221).

In his review of the field, Rutter (1980:5) noted that many observers have emphasized that adolescence itself is a socially created category which is no longer synonimous with biological changes. He stressed that psycho-social concepts of adolescence have varied greatly over time and that the term adolescence was seldom used before the 18th century (cf. Aries, 1962). He concluded that 'It is clear that to a considerable extent the youth "phenomenon" and the current concepts of psychosocial adolescence are products of the prevailing Western Culture. Adolescence is recognized and treated as a distinct stage of development because the coincidence of extended education and early sexual maturation have meant a prolonged phase of physical maturity associated with economic and psychosocial dependence; because many widely held theories specify that adolescence *should* be difficult; because commercial interests demanded a youth culture; and because schools and colleges have ensured that large numbers of young people are kept together in an age-segregated social group. To that extent psychosocial adolescence is created by society and has no necessary connection with the developmental process.' (Rutter, 1980:7).

Similarly, Bandura (1972) argued that the whole notion of rebellion against parental authority is simply without any basis in reality, while Douvan & Adelson (1966) found extensive minor conflict (only occasionally spilling over into open confrontation) focusing mainly on leisure time activities, personal appearance etc, but with considerable consensus as far as major values, such as moral, political or religious beliefs, were concerned. Thus, while not disputing the existence of some differences in values, they concluded that both the potency of peer norms and the discrepancy between parental and peer standards have been overestimated (cf. McClelland, 1982). Others have argued that the relationship between parental and peer influence is multi-dimensional and should not be reduced to a simple conflict model. For example, Constanzo & Shaw (1966) found that susceptibility to group pressures is significantly related to age with the highest level of conformity to group pressure between the ages of 11-13 years and a gradual decrease thereafter. Conformity is also related to such factors as self-esteem, personal attractiveness, and prowess in various valued activities. Furthermore, Biddle et al. (1980) found that parental and peer influence operates through different processes, with different effects on adolescent behaviour, depending on the sphere of activity in question.

As Coleman (ibid) points out, even the original studies into relative parent and peer influence demonstrated the importance of differential spheres of activity. For example Bowerman & Kinch (1959) found a number of different dimensions of commitment to parents and peers; Brittain (1963) showed that allegiance was not a mutually exclusive either/or situation but depended on the nature of the question under consideration; and Larson (1972)

added a temporal dimension by showing that adolescents were more likely to follow the wishes of parents in contexts with implications for the future, and those of peers when current status and identity needs are at issue (cf. Lesser & Kandel, 1969; Offer, 1969; Rutter et al. 1976; Conger, 1977; Licitra-Klechler & Waas, 1993).

In short, while all are agreed that there is undoubtedly testing behaviour, disagreement over values, and domestic conflict; and that for a minority these conflicts may be amplified into serious incidents, the breakdown of relationships, and damaging consequences both for the individual and society; to extrapolate from there to a deep rooted and widespread generational conflict receives little support from serious research. 'There seems to be little doubt that the extreme view of the generation gap, involving the notion of a war between the generations…is dependent on a myth. It is the result of a stereotype which is useful to the mass media, and given currency by a small minority of disaffected young people and resentful adults.' (Coleman, 1980:72) Moreover, support for this myth is provided by many researchers because they tend only to investigate selected populations of deviant youth or spectacular subcultures, thereby further encouraging an unbalanced view in which disturbance and deviance are amplified.

= The role of the peer group in cultural transmission
Given the weight of evidence available in the international literature, then, the question of generational conflict within which Frits van Wel frames his article is seen to be a largely rhetorical one which serves merely to set up a straw man whom few would in any case expect to remain standing when confronted with the empirical world. However, few would deny that the peer group does play a key role in certain

important aspects of adolescent life and development. The question is: is cultural reproduction one of them?

To begin with, it is necessary to make a distinction between the supportive function of the adolescent peer group and the extent of its influence (Coleman, 1980:91). Around the time of puberty there is a clear shift in leisure activity orientation away from the home towards close friends, a process peaking at about 15 years of age (i.e. the age group studied by van Wel). This is accompanied (as already noted) by a highly ambivalent emotional shift in which the peer group provides essential support to its members in the process of maturation. In later adolescence, there is an increased pairing off and the flock becomes a loosely associated group of couples (Rutter, 1980:26).

Nevertheless, in adolescence, peer interaction does take up a great deal of time. One major study (Csikszentmihalyi et al. 1977) found talking with peers, watching TV, and studying to be the most prevalent primary activities of adolescents, with the first accounting for one-third of total time. Talking with peers was also the most highly rated activity. They concluded that the main context of adolescent socialization is peer interaction. A number of studies have also noted gender differences in this respect. Johnson & Aries (1983) found that females converse more frequently and in greater depth about personal and relationship matters, while male conversation tends more to centre around activity oriented topics. They also noted that females and males engage in friendship relationships differently (cf. O'Donnell, 1976).

To this extent, few would dispute the significance of the peer group in adolescence. However, the central question must be *why* – from all the individuals with whom we regularly come into contact – do we choose some rather

than others to be our friends ? If we fail to address this question then we are led into the kind of circularity which characterizes Frits van Wel's analysis: for, if my close friends are the major influence on my cultural style, where do my close friends get *their* cultural styles? The logic of the argument demands that the answer must be, 'from me'! But this is unsatisfactory, first because it ultimately implies that there is some kind of spontaneous combustion of cultural styles going on in the adolescent peer group which is independent of any other elements in the social structure and, second, because it still leaves unanswered the pivotal question of why we choose some people rather than others to be our friends.

The bases of friendship choice
Many researchers have demonstrated that friendship choice is based on perceived need similarity, and/or on similarities in personality, attitude and background (e.g. Izard, 1960; Secord & Backman, 1964; Pierce, 1970; Brislin, 1971; Black, 1974; cf. Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Duck, 1975; Kandel, 1978; Bigelow & La Gaipa, 1980; Berndt, 1982; Billy et al. 1984; Rogers et al. 1984; Tolson & Urberg, 1993). However, important as these findings are, they still leave us facing the question of what it is which generates need and attitude similarity in the first place. In order to address this question it is important to recall Cohen's (1972) observation that the conditions of interaction; i.e. the access to one another of people who have in common similar life conditions and hence similar needs or interests; so that they may freely associate with one another and elaborate common cultures; is subject to social constraints and social control. It has too often been taken for granted, he argued, that young people with similar needs or interests will 'just naturally' drift together and form their own social worlds.

Subcultural theorists in particular have

argued forcibly against such a 'natural drift' interpretation. For example, Clark (1974) noted that important social factors such as age, gender, religion and class have extensive cultural implications and form the basis of cultural and social groupings. However, he was careful to point out that age alone, for all its range of cultural implications, cannot be the basis of a subculture. It is only when, 'there is a degree of detachment from other age groups, coupled with economic, political and social marginality, and the development of extensive age specific interests and ideologies that one can begin to speak of a youth subculture.' (Clarke, 1974:431). Clarke was also of the view that the majority of adolescents do not break with their parents' culture completely when they form culturally cohesive peer groups. Rather, they treat this culture selectively, ignoring the parts which they find irrelevant and emphasizing those which they perceive to be relevant to their own situation. It is in this way, he argued, that 'structural problems' are solved. In other words, social structural conditions are the basic generating forces determining the contours of the cultural field, but within them groups and subcultures possess considerable autonomy in the creation of specific cultural forms.

Such a structural perspective receives support from other subcultural theorists. Cohen (1970:102) for example, argues that the crucial condition for the emergence of new cultural forms is the existence, in effective interaction with one another, of a number of persons with similar problems of adjustment. Many such problems concern the success and status allocation mechanisms of society i.e. where, for whatever reason, these systematically exclude certain individuals and groups, subcultural involvement creates an alternative status system which is better able to facilitate the process of identity-formation (cf. Merton, 1968).

The function of subcultures
According to the subcultural model, structural position leads to differential interaction (because individuals sharing similar statuses interact more with each other than with those occupying different status positions) and out of this interaction comes a common system of beliefs, values and norms which leads to the formation of subcultures within which individuals are able to develop attitudes, behaviour, styles etc. (Arnold, 1970; cf. Murdock, 1974).

Brake (1985:24) summarizes the particular functions which subcultures fulfil for the young:
1. They offer an imaginary solution to certain structural problems created by internal contradictions of the socio-economic structure which are collectively experienced. These are often class problems which are generationally experienced.
2. They offer a range of cultural elements that can be used to develop an achieved identity outside the ascribed identity offered by home, school or work.
3. As such, an alternative form of social reality is experienced, rooted in a class culture, but mediated by neighbourhood, or else a symbolic community transmitted via the media.
4. Subcultures offer a meaningful way of life during leisure time.
5. Subcultures offer to individuals solutions to certain existential dilemmas, by enabling an identity to be constructed outside of school or work.

Subcultures *may* contain the seeds of a radical dissent, especially in a situation where exceptionally large birth cohorts create economic bottlenecks. As Walliman & Zito (1984) have argued, faced with such bottlenecks the entire cohort will experience unique problems, the sharing of which in peer groups allows adolescents to arrive at specific political,

economic and in-group identity. In general the suddenly emerging youth protest movements in the past can be attributed in large part to the emergence of such significantly larger birth cohorts at particular times (certainly the 1960's were a case in point).

However, and this argues against a pure `generation gap' explanation, such problems are experienced differentially, tending to be especially acute for those of middle class origin, 'entering the system with high expectations based on earlier conditions' (Walliman & Zito, ibid). The class-based nature of much youthful revolt has been noted by many observers. For example, according to Brake (1980; cf. Kasschau et al. 1974; Willis, 1978) middle class subcultures tend to be different both in formation and organization, are generally more culturally conscious, and develop 'alternative' cultural adaptations. This is made possible because of their favourable relation to the economic surplus, as Brake (1980:60) puts it: 'The whole notion of dropping out, presupposes a location in the class structure from which to drop (and return), as opposed to the harsh reality of working class life, a flight from the "never had"''.

In short, young people do not come together wholly by chance. Empirically, they tend to cluster in specific locations in the social structure, sharing a set of common experiences, as a result of which they may become conventionally respectable, delinquent, cultural rebels or whatever, 'Conventionality, rebellion or a rejection of some form of respec-tability...is related to the actual age group of young people combined with their class position. Those who have realistically seen school as not related to their future life in routinised labour have different attitudes to those who see a link between education and

their future careers.' (Brake, 1985:27).

Brake's emphasis here on the central role of education in the formation of youth cultures has been echoed by many other researchers (Coleman, 1961; Hargreaves, 1967; Sugarman, 1967; Brown & O'Leary, 1971, Di Maggio, 1982; Roe, 1983, 1987a, 1987b, 1989, 1990, 1992, 1993a; DuBois & Hirsch, 1993). Indeed, it can be argued that education is *the* most important single factor in the process of cultural reproduction.

Education and cultural reproduction
According to this perspective (see e.g. Bowles & Gintis, 1977; Meyer, 1977; Collins, 1979; Giroux, 1981) one of the main purposes of schooling is that of sorting and assigning students into hierarchically ordered classes by means of the allocation of grades and the socially recognized status titles of success and failure. It is thereby partly in their negotiations with the school that young people acquire the bases of their social world, including their media use patterns and cultural orientations. Where the established achievement systems within education are sufficient for constructing self-esteem and a positive identity, students will be inclined to accept the culture legitimated by those systems; to the extent that they fail to do so, however, e.g. where the school holds out little promise of future rewards for some students, identification with and participation in less legitimate cultural activities may be substituted. It is in this way that schools can be seen as creating particular status cultures (Stinchcombe, 1964; Dembo, 1972; Roe, 1989). The most systematic application of this perspective is contained in the work of Bourdieu (1984, 1990), Bourdieu & Passeron (1977, 1979), and Bourdieu & Darbel (1991) – although Frits van Wel omits this particular aspect of Bourdieu's analysis. Bourdieu argues that a hidden effect of the allocation of status titles by the educational system is that written into the

tacit definition of the academic qualification is the guarantee that the student possesses a general pattern of culture. This process occurs at all stages of schooling by the manipulation of aspirations, self-image and self-esteem which results from formally channelling students 'towards prestigeous or devalued positions implying or excluding legitimate practice' (Bourdieu, 1984:25). To each position which the school allocates is attached a social image of the status of that position. Thus, the effect of allocation: 'Mainly operates through the social image of the position in question and the prospects objectively inscribed in it, among the foremost of which are a certain type of cultural accumulation and a certain image of cultural accomplishment. The official differences produced by academic classifications tend to produce (or reinforce) real differences by inducing in the classified individuals a collectively recognized and supported belief in the differences, thus producing behaviours that are intended to bring real being into line with official being.' (Bourdieu,1984:25).

Activities external to the explicit demand of the school; such as reading certain kinds of books, or listening to certain kinds of music (and not others), are thereby inscribed in the allotted position as a tacit demand which is continually reinforced by teacher expectations and peer pressure. In this way the school, 'Succeeds in imposing cultural practices that it does not teach and does not even explicitly demand but which belong to the attributes attached by status to the position it assigns, the qualifications it awards and the social positions to which the latter give access.' (Bourdieu, 1984:26).

According to Bourdieu, education is the major means by which we acquire a practical command of the master patterns of culture: the process of acquiring mastery of the code

required to read and make sense of cultural products. It is also the process by which specific dispositions towards taste and cultural preferences are acquired and by which the inclination to appropriate cultural products is reproduced. Therefore, it is claimed, similar kinds of schooling provide students with common thought categories, similar general dispositions, homogeneous programmes of perception, thought and action, and basic transposable dispositions with regard to aesthetic taste. Bourdieu claims that taste is nothing more than a practical mastery of the sense of what is befitting to an individual occupying a given social space, 'as exactly indicated in the expression "that looks" ("that looks petty-bourgeois", "that looks yuppie", "that looks intellectual" etc.).' (Bourdieu, 1990:113)

Thus, when students choose different cultural styles which they find agreeable for their position they are, in fact, classifying themselves (and, 'nothing more clearly affirms one's class, nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music', Bourdieu, 1984:16-18); and it is this classification, this 'sense of one's place', that is 'at the basis of all forms of cooperation, friendship, love affairs, marriage, associations etc.' (Bourdieu, 1990:128). The importance attached to the school here is not intended to negate the importance of social origin. Bourdieu stresses that the patterns established in the family form the basis for the structuring of school experiences and that these, in turn, underlie the structuring of all subsequent experiences (including the reception of cultural products). 'Academic capital' is defined as the guaranteed product of the combined effects of cultural transmission by the family and by the school. In every area of cultural practice and preference he finds stronger correlations with academic capital

than with social origin; correlations in which there is a strong opposition not only between the middle classes and the working classes, but also (especially as one moves towards the most legitimate areas of culture) a clear hierarchy with the dominant class based on differences in academic capital (Bourdieu, 1984:16).

Education and music tastes: the empirical evidence
The main heuristic value of this perspective lies in the empirical prediction that tastes and cultural practices will reveal structural regularities which will be related to the activities of the educational system. There has long been evidence of an indirect link between the school and adolescents' uses of and tastes in music. Studies have shown that involvement in certain subcultures is negatively related to school achievement (Stinchcombe, 1964; Hargreaves, 1967; Walker, 1988), and that many subcultures express a strong attachment to some form of music (Sugarman, 1967; Brown & O'Leary, 1971; cf. Robinson & Fink, 1986; Lewis, 1987; Christenson & Peterson, 1988).

Evidence of a more direct relationship between school experience and music use has been provided by Swedish research. In a number of studies (Roe, 1983, 1985; Roe, 1987a, 1992; cf. Roe & Lofgren, 1988; Rosengren et al. 1989) it was found that school achievement and attitude to school have independent effects on musical preferences, even when controlling for social background. These studies indicated that successful students begin to cultivate a taste for elements of 'high-brow' culture perceived as relevant for their future; at the same time cultivating a distaste for those elements of culture which are perceived to be antithetical to it. School failures, on the other hand, tend to react to the ascription of negative status by rejecting the academic world and the intellectual culture which it represents, and

develop a taste for 'low-brow' culture, such as musical styles defining themselves in opposition to the culture which the school is perceived to represent, and reject anything 'high-brow' as 'not for me'. For the majority, who anticipate neither palpable success nor palpable failure, and who thereby feel less acutely the need to distinguish themselves conspicuously (in whatever direction) from mainstream culture, less demonstrative 'middle-brow' cultural elements may offer fitting symbolic spaces.

Specifically, Roe (1993a:52) found:
1. A positive relationship between school achievement and liking for classical music.
2. The tastes of high achievers from lower status backgrounds were more similar to those of high achievers from higher status backgrounds than they were to those of low achievers from lower status backgrounds.
3. A negative relationship between school achievement and liking for heavy metal.
4. The tastes of low achievers from higher status backgrounds were more similar to those of low achievers from lower status backgrounds than they were to those of high achievers from higher status backgrounds.
5. Knowledge of more legitimate forms of music increased with higher school achievement.
6. The association between school achievement and music knowledge was stronger than that between social background and music knowledge.
7. The mean level of knowledge of all types of music analyzed was especially high among middle and upper middle class high and very high achievers.

Extending this analysis to post-school social mobility, Roe (1993b) predicted that those experiencing social mobility will display music

tastes deviant from those typical of their status background, and that the downwardly mobile will display an unusually high level of preference for culturally less legitimate types of music. The results showed, as predicted, that different types of social mobility were differentially related to preferences for music types differing in cultural legitimacy, e.g. a very strong preference for heavy metal was found to be related most to intergenerational downwards mobility, whereas a very high level of liking for classical music was related to intergenerational upwards mobility.

Conclusion
This article has been concerned with identifying the central mechanism of cultural reproduction. While most of the studies cited have dealt with music tastes, Bourdieu's model predicts that similar results will be obtained from analyses of all aspects of taste and cultural consumption, from literature to theatre going and museum visiting. Thus, 'all the indications are that knowledge and tastes arrange themselves into constellations (strictly linked to level of education)', with the result that a typical structure of preferences and knowledge in one sphere of culture is very likely to be linked to a similar structure of knowledge and tastes in other spheres (Bourdieu & Darbel, 1991:63).

Furthermore, we have seen that there is a considerable body of evidence to suggest that it is the educational system which plays the most important role in structuring cultural dispositions. In the words of Bourdieu & Darbel (1991:67), 'The school is alone capable of mass producing competent individuals endowed with the schemes of perception, thought and expression which are the conditions for the appropriation of cultural goods, and with the generalized and permanent disposition to appropriate them. The specific function of the

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school is to develop or create the dispositions which make for the cultivated individual.'

During certain periods these dispositions *may* assume a generational aspect. In particular, in a period of 'diploma inflation', the disparity between the aspirations that the educational system produces and the opportunities it really offers is a structural reality which affects a whole school generation (even if its specific forms are different in different social classes). 'The collective disillusionment which results from this struc-tural mismatch between the social identity that the school system seems to promise and the social identity that the labour market actually offers', is the source of, 'all the refusals and negations of the adolescent counterculture' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979:83-84). This discrepancy, moreover, finds expression, 'in unusual forms of struggle, protest and escapism that the organizations traditionally involved in political struggle find hard to understand. These young people, whose social identity and self image have been undermined by a social system and an educational system that have fobbed them off with worthless paper, can find no other way of restoring their personal and social integrity than by a total refusal. The deskilling of a whole generation…engenders a sort of collective disillusionment: a whole generation finding that it has been taken for a ride, is inclined to extend towards all institutions the mixture of revolt and resentment it feels toward the educational system. This anti-institutional caste of mind… can lead in extreme cases to a denunciation of the social order.' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979:84). In conclusion, whether we are discussing cultural differences within a single generation, or cultural differences between generations, what we are actually dealing with is not so much a 'generation gap' as an 'education gap'.

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