

Delving into the ways that education shapes cultural engagement

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This research was conducted by **Natascha Notten, Bram Lancee, Herman G. van de Werfhorst** and **Harry B. G. Ganzeboom** at **four different universities in the Netherlands**

Summary

There are two contrasting explanations for why levels of cultural engagement vary according to education levels within populations. One states that people come to appreciate particular forms of art because they express their belonging to a particular social group (status). Another claims that cultural activities are more rewarding to individuals who are better able to process complex information (cognitive ability). This study found that both cognitive ability and status affect the role of education in cultural engagement, and that this differs according to local context.

Many different factors affect engagement in cultural activities

Data from the International Adult Literacy Survey in 1994 and 1998 covering 18 countries was subjected to a series of statistical analyses. Respondents were aged 26 and older. 'High brow' cultural engagement was defined as attending cultural performances (movies, plays or concerts) and frequency of reading books. Higher levels of education and literacy (cognitive ability) were strongly associated with increased levels of cultural engagement. Parental educational level, being younger (aged 26–35) and being female were also highly predictive of engaging in cultural activities.

Status-related effect of education varies across countries

Status had less of an effect on cultural participation in societies that had large proportions of highly educated people (i.e. there was less educational inequality). The same was also true for societies with more educational mobility – as indicated by differences between the level of educational attainment for parents and children. This indicates that status incentives are reduced for cultural engagement in more equal societies. The authors suggest that reducing educational inequality may result in less inequality in other areas. On the other hand, the relationship between a person’s literacy skills (cognitive ability) and cultural engagement did not change according to their native country’s level of educational inequality, suggesting that cognitive ability is not affected by social context.

This summary is by **Tanya Graham, King’s Knowledge Exchange Associate**

Keywords

survey **status** **education** **population** **engagement**

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