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'Bookshelfie': Book Ownership, Class and Families

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New words enter the English language every year. This year's newest addition to the Oxford Dictionaries is 'selfie' – a photograph that one takes of oneself, generally to be uploaded to social media websites. Another related word is the 'bookshelfie' – a selfie taken with one's books for the purpose of literary self-promotion. Although the word bookshelfie may be new, the tradition of posing in front of one's book is not, as portraits of statesmen, scholars and clergy across the ages demonstrate. But what is it exactly that a bookcase full of books communicates about us as ordinary people or families? In an era where the book as a medium is under pressure from electronic reading devices, it is remarkable how little we actually know about books as material culture and their impact on our everyday lives. Research has tended to overlook the role of books in shaping social relationships, family values, everyday spatial practices and class identity.

In a study of twelve middle-class British families across three generations it was found that both adults and children recognise the cultural significance of having, owning and displaying books in one's home. While the study looked more broadly at the reproduction of middle-class values, the findings discussed here focus on book ownership and middle-class families' inclination to surround themselves with books, and how such practices are passed on to the next generation of children. By looking at books as material objects it is possible to describe the ability of artefacts to communicate specific socio-cultural meanings about families and their class position.

Book reading in society

Reading is a highly valued activity in contemporary society and we are frequently reminded that 'reading matters'. This normative and unquestioned perspective that book reading is a 'good use of our time' and that everyone should do more reading, especially of fiction, is so ingrained that it penetrates most aspects of our culture. However, ideas about what is morally good for us are inevitably accompanied by societal worries that we are not doing enough of such activities, exemplified by the assumed 'decline' in reading. Public criticism is especially directed at families who are not perceived to conform to often very middle-class evaluations about appropriate family life, such as reading bedtime stories to children.

While literacy research overall confirms that family background shapes children's and adults' reading practices and choices, the manner in which such findings are reported often downplays the existence of the many low-income families who *do* engage in reading activities. One influential study of children's reading habits, for example, concluded that 'socio-economic circumstances and family background are highly significant factors in children's reading choices and habits' (Hall and Coles 1999: 91). While this is statistically correct, as children in social class A on average

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read 2.92 books and children growing up in D/E families only read 2.4 books in the previous month, this finding and others similar to it, tend to ignore the many children (and adults) from low-income backgrounds who do read books.

The high valuation of fiction over and above other forms of reading material also impacts on reading statistics. Studies that apply a broader definition of reading, to include newspapers and magazines, show that 98% of adults regularly read something (Bennett et al. 2009: 94). This points to the existence of a wider 'field of reading', which includes magazines, comics and newspapers, and a more restricted 'field of books'. However, the socio-cultural prestige associated with reading derives from being a reader of books, not from being a reader of magazines. The consumption of books plays a significant role in establishing and maintaining class distinction.

More than text

Books are commonly valued as gateways to text or content, rather than as material objects that people buy, borrow, handle, are surrounded by or otherwise engage with as they go about their daily lives. If people claim they cannot live without books, they rarely refer to books as physical objects, but to books as containers of text that do all those wonderful things that text can do: inform, inspire, educate and move.

Our limited understanding of books as material objects is becoming increasingly evident in public debates about the rapid growth of electronic reading devices and the future of the book. While the experience of reading a text unmistakably differs between reading an original manuscript, hardback, paperback or eBook, most readers and publishers struggle to articulate these differences, beyond the basic observation that an eBook cannot (or at least should not!) be read in the bath. Yet among middle-class families book ownership, is still cherished beyond books as text. This raises important questions about *how* books in their physical manifestation shape social relationships, social practices, feelings of family belonging, and class identity.

'A house full of books'

Looking at book ownership in a generational context, it has indeed become more common for contemporary middle-class children to have often very large collections of books in their bedrooms. This is not to say that access to books, including ownership, was uncommon among their parents' and grandparents' generations. Almost half of the grandparents interviewed claimed they had 'lots' of books belonging to them in childhood, a factor – in these cases- determined by their fathers' connection with education or with long periods of childhood illness.

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While book ownership in itself is no guarantee that children are readers, owning and having books appears to create an intergenerational bond or family identity. That books are valued across the generations is clear in the following dialogue between a mother and her 7-year old daughter:

Mother: Yeah, but we always had stories read and the house was always full of books. I wouldn't have a house without any books in it.

Daughter: Me too.

Mother: I know some people perhaps don't have quite as many books in the house, but we always do have quite a few books.

Daughter: We have about four or five bookcases

Mother: We do find it quite hard getting rid of them

Daughter: We read books.

This daughter is keen to support her mother's assessment of the number of books in their house and the importance of keeping books, but the dialogue also shows that book ownership is a 'natural' or given outcome of being a reader. 'We read books', hence we surround ourselves with books. In this respect, 'having a house full of books' is the material manifestation of a shared family concern with reading, as articulated by many families.

A family's mutual understanding that reading and books are important to them – as individuals and as a family – is communicated to younger generations of children by having and keeping books.

A community of book readers

Exhibiting books on one's shelves is not simply about displaying relationships *within* the family, books also demonstrate belonging to a larger community or class of book readers. Because of the dominant assumption that reading is a social good, families who own books can emphasize their own class position within society, while setting themselves apart (or above) families that do not own books.

For example, in response to a news story about the growing number of children living in households without books, one of the grandfathers in the study took a 'bookshelfie' and uploaded it to Facebook. By photographing his bookcases this grandfather signalled that he is 'well-read' and by extension 'educated' and possesses cultural capital. But his facebook status also described his 'shock' about the many households that do not live up to normative expectations about book ownership. The thread of comments highlighted the morality that surrounds reading values, together with the effort middle-class families exhort to appear respectable. By extension book ownership is both a matter of pride and shame. All the book owners, young and old, showed a real sense of pride over their books, a pride that went beyond their love of reading. Family members who, on the other hand, did not

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keep books in their home voiced their shame or embarrassment. Failure to conform to classed expectations about book ownership was seen as embarrassing, an observation that emphasises the powerful emotions, whether pride or embarrassment, material objects can engender.

Social mobility

What also became clear, as family members described their relationship with books, is that they associate upward social mobility with the increased number of books a family owned. In one case, a grandfather described his working class childhood as deprived in part because his family had 'only three books', whereas now he has books in every room of his home. As articulated by family members, book ownership is not merely a symbol of class belonging, but also a material assertion of upward social mobility. This ability of books on shelves to communicate perceptions of educational and economic achievement, as well as to convey to others what kind of family this is, may be one of the reasons why books continue to be so highly valued as material objects.

So what is in a book?

In summary, among the youngest generation the physical presence of books together with children's embedded understanding of their family's appreciation of reading, clearly shapes their understanding of the type of family they belong to and specifically the classed expectations placed on them as part of their middle-class upbringing. The study also shows that book ownership, as a form of objectified cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984, 1986) which acts to distinguish 'us' from 'them' thereby conveying cultural and social meanings about middle-class morality and social distinction. This notion of books as status symbols through which families can portray an image of being well-read and knowable, and in effect educated and clever, is an important factor in the distinctiveness of books as objects imbued with symbolic value.

While our relationship with books as material objects undoubtedly will change in the future, for contemporary middle-class reading families having a 'house full of books' still appears to facilitate a process of identification both with other family members and with a class of like-minded book owners.

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