

# Cultivating cultural capital and transforming cultural fields: A study with arts and disability organisations in Europe

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**Abstract**

This article critically discusses participation by people with disabilities in the arts, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. It is informed by a qualitative study with representatives of organisations working on arts and disability in 22 European countries. The article highlights that experiences of inequality at various levels, including within education systems, and medicalised understandings of what disability is, continue to hamper arts participation and development of cultural capital by people with disabilities. A Bourdieusian analysis unveils how organisations working on arts and disability consciously engage in 'high' arts practices as an expression of distinction and in a way that is designed to reframe what is culturally valued within their fields. It also demonstrates the continued relevance of Bourdieu's theorising of cultural capital and of arts practices as distinction for potentially marginalised groups. Furthermore, participants often linked arts participation involving high artistic standards to potential change in how societies understand and relate to disability, connecting cultural practices and political struggles.

**Keywords**

arts, Bourdieu, cultural capital, disability, distinction

**Introduction**

This article discusses participation of people with disabilities<sup>1</sup> in culture, especially as creators of art, reporting on an empirical study and drawing on concepts from the work of Pierre Bourdieu to elucidate relationships between cultural practices and broader social processes. It builds on literature foregrounding the role of culture in the production of disability from critical or cultural disability studies. We posit that the perceptions and actions of study participants, who were working in arts and disability, are not only of

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core sociological concern, but demonstrate an engagement that is both cultural and political. A Bourdieusian analysis allows us to engage with the nuanced ways in which cultural reproduction enforces inequalities and marginalisation in the lives of people with disabilities and how that is also resisted, with creation in the arts becoming an expression of agency in response to dominant cultural reproductions and symbolic systems that confine 'disability' within medicalised or charitable approaches.

It is well-known that medical model approaches to disability – which apprehend disability as an individual, medical problem and support charitable responses to disability issues – were challenged by disability advocates, who advanced socio-political conceptions of disability, notably the social model of disability. While a range of models of disability continue to be debated (see Goodley, 2011; Waldschmidt, 2018), critical disability studies are associated with a move away from a preoccupation with binary understandings such as the social versus the medical or disability versus impairment (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). For Goodley (2013, p. 634), the term 'critical disability studies' includes a range of theoretical perspectives, all emphasising 'cultural, discursive and relational undergirdings' of the disability experience. Waldschmidt (2018) outlines how cultural disability studies augment critical perspectives with tools from diverse disciplines, including the humanities, and suggests that critical and cultural approaches align in several respects including in their questioning of 'both the reality of disability and impairment'. Thus, for scholars writing within these perspectives, impairments, as well as disability, are a social construction not an essential truth, rejecting a basis in nature or physiology (Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009) and scholarship often focuses on discourse while problematising ideas of 'normalcy'. Attention is reorientated to ableism, or to ideas about normativity constructed by those whose bodies and minds are deemed to constitute 'the normal' (Thomas & Milligan, 2018, p. 121). 'Disability' then becomes a social phenomenon that can illuminate culture (Titchkosky, 2003, p. 3) and does not remain at the periphery of culture, but is 'something central to our art and to our humanity' (Howe et al., 2016, p. 6).

Within critical and cultural approaches, scholarship addressing disability art and aesthetics is particularly relevant to arguments presented here. Disability art emerged in association with the disability rights movement and is based on legitimising the experience of people with disabilities 'as equal within art and all other cultural practices' (Darke, 2003, p. 132). Originally linked with expressions of disability experiences, often for audiences comprised of people with disabilities, disability art is more recently characterised by artists wanting to attract mainstream audiences, and by a combination of disability issues and non-disability issues (Solvang, 2018). Disability art seeks not to adapt to the way a mainstream art form has been created but with 'disability experiences and disabled bodies just as they are' (Sandahl, 2018, p. 85). Thus, it is part of a process of representing 'a more accurate picture of society, life, disability and impairment and art itself' and is a challenge to traditional aesthetic and social values (Darke, 2003, p. 132). For Siebers (2006, p. 64), disability aesthetics prize difference as a value in itself, refusing 'to recognize the representation of the healthy body . . . as the sole determination of the aesthetic'. Notwithstanding this, recent studies evidence low levels of participation by people with disabilities in

the arts in many European countries as audience members and especially as creators of culture, as well as many barriers to participation (Leahy & Ferri, 2022, 2023).

Informed by scholarship from a critical/cultural perspective and engaging with disability art and aesthetics, this article discusses arts participation of persons with disabilities drawing on concepts developed by Pierre Bourdieu, employing especially the concept of ‘cultural capital’. Bourdieu’s concept of culture is intricately linked to social inequality and domination (Waldschmidt, 2018) and his concepts have had ‘a paradigmatic influence’ on research on diverse topics, including cultural taste and education (Strand & Spillman, 2020, p. 45). This article aims to contribute to the limited but growing body of work employing Bourdieu’s theories to explore disability experiences in the arts (Clements, 2006; Darke, 2003; Saur & Johansen, 2013) and extends them, not least, by locating Bourdieu’s theoretical arguments in a broad empirical study with people engaged in arts and disability. It also builds on work applying Bourdieu’s theories to disability experiences in a range of other areas that include education (Dimity et al., 2021; O’Donovan, 2021; Reichenberg, 2020; Trainor, 2008; Waterfield & Whelan, 2017), leisure and sports (Holt et al., 2013; Purdue & Howe, 2012; Townsend & Cushion, 2022) and inequality (Byrne, 2018; Edwards & Imrie, 2003).

This article shares the commitment to asserting the central importance of disability to the sociological imaginary asserted by Thomas (2021), despite its frequent relegation to the margins of sociological thought. Specifically, it is informed by the fact that key aspects of Bourdieu’s theoretical toolkit, notably cultural capital, are underemployed in analysis of engagement with arts creation by people with disabilities, even though, as we show, creating art emerges as an important site of both marginalisation and resistance to the cultural reproduction of dominant social structures. A key contribution to these debates is to evidence that engaging in ‘high’ art is enacted in part as a challenge to the cultural marginalisation of people with disabilities through actions with primarily artistic aims but that can also be understood as political.

This article will first recall key theoretical concepts from Bourdieu and some key debates that have followed, arguing that, amongst others, Bourdieu’s concept of the body as a bearer of symbolic value makes this analysis particularly apt in respect of disability. We then outline the methods used in a new empirical study with 25 organisations working on arts and disability across 22 European countries, and, in the next section, draw on our analysis of this research to show that experiences within educational systems, including lack of access to professional training, are amongst the social inequalities experienced by people with disabilities that hamper development of cultural capital. We go on to discuss how artists with disabilities and organisations working on arts and disability seek to transform the fields in which they operate and to contribute to broader political struggles.<sup>2</sup>

## **Theoretical background: Bourdieu’s cultural capital and beyond**

Bourdieu’s ideas are notable for going beyond the importance of economics to include other factors – including an individual’s culturally defined tastes, social connections and

symbolic perceptions – used to analyse social constructs (Purdue & Howe, 2012). In many works, Bourdieu posits that dominant classes get to define their bodies and lifestyles as superior, because they have greater access to cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1984, 1997; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), and argues for a methodology involving an ‘inter-dependent and co-constructed trio’ – field, capital and habitus (Thomson, 2008, p. 69).

Writing about television (but in a way that is applicable to other fields), Bourdieu (1998, pp. 40–41) defined a ‘field’ as: ‘a structured social space . . . contain[ing] people who dominate and people who are dominated’. In Bourdieu’s works, ‘capital’ is generally used to refer to power relations that underpin hierarchies and norms across a field (Bourdieu, 1986, 1987). Famously, as well as economic capital, Bourdieu proposed two other forms: social capital (affiliations and networks) and cultural capital (forms of knowledge, taste, aesthetic and cultural preferences, language, narrative and voice) (Bourdieu, 1986, 1987). Thus, cultural capital refers to the culturally valued tastes, consumption patterns and actions stemming from belonging to a certain group (Bourdieu, 1987, 1997; Purdue & Howe, 2012). Cultural capital has three forms: objectified (physical objects perceived as having value which can convey status such as writings, pictures, etc.), institutionalised (recognition such as academic qualifications), and embodied or physical (associated with tastes, language and with long-lasting dispositions of body and mind) (Bourdieu, 1986; Shilling, 2003, p. 130). In the field of the arts, Bourdieu posits that cultural capital is presented as reflecting the intrinsic value of artworks in themselves and the capacity of certain individuals to appreciate those ‘essential’ qualities (Grenfell & Hardy, 2007; Moore, 2008). Further, Bourdieu identifies ‘symbolic capital’ as the form that different types of capital take when recognised as legitimate, and that can be ‘exchanged’ in other fields, such as credentials, and also including prestige, status and authority (Bourdieu, 1987; Thomson, 2008). Bourdieu also demonstrates that such configurations of capital change over time (Grenfell & Hardy, 2007, p. 45).

These capitals affect what Bourdieu terms ‘habitus’ – ways of thinking and behaviour acquired during childhood and youth that are both ‘structured and structuring’ (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 170). The formation of habitus takes place initially within the family, but, for Bourdieu, education is where capital assumes an institutionalised form (Moore, 2008, p. 103). Edwards and Imrie (2003, p. 241) highlight the focus on the corporeal, embodied experiences of everyday life that inheres in the notion of habitus, which seeks ‘to understand systems of interaction between individual social beings and broader social structures in the (re)production of social inequalities’. Bourdieu did not theorise disability, but at the heart of his theoretical framework is an understanding of the body as a bearer of symbolic value (Edwards & Imrie, 2003; Townsend & Cushion, 2022, p. 893). For example, cultural capital is, he suggests, linked to the body and presupposes embodiment (Bourdieu, 1986). Certain groups have power to define ‘appropriate bodily forms which are of most value in society at a given time’, and, arguably, forms of embodiment create the basis for other varieties of capital (Shilling, 2003, pp. 126, 130). Amongst the groups with particular power over fields concerned with the body, Bourdieu (1978, pp. 826–827) includes doctors and educators in the broadest sense. Medicine is a dominant social field when it comes to disability, and the bodily demeanour of some people with disabilities can be interpreted negatively by others, confining them in their habitus through

‘cultural impoverishment and cultural difference’; thus, the prominence of medical ideas affects not only the potential physical capital vested in the disabled body, but also its cultural and symbolic value (Edwards & Imrie, 2003, p. 248). However, this is not fixed but reflects context-specific interrelationships between bodily expression and social structure and agency (Bourdieu, 1990; Edwards & Imrie, 2003). Despite the depiction by some critics of Bourdieu’s ideas of reproduction in simplistic or deterministic terms, he did not depict the habitus as immutable (Atkinson, 2012; Singh, 2021).

Overall, ‘culture’, became ‘the conceptual laboratory’ of Bourdieu’s sociology, understood as a mode of domination as well as a mode of subversion (Heinich, 2018, p. 190). In emphasising this dual aspect of culture, there are parallels with theorising within critical or cultural perspectives on disability, where ‘disability’ is understood as a ‘unique boundary of experience’ that requires a rethinking of culture or of ‘our typical ways of making sense of ourselves, of others, and of our culture’, as Titchkosky puts it (2003, p. 17). But ‘culture’ is a complex concept, with many elements to it, including the way of life of particular groups, as well as academic and aesthetic development that links to the term ‘high’ art (Williams, 1983). Bourdieu’s analysis is associated with the idea of an elite who participate in ‘high’ culture and in a classic binary categorisation between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ culture, with the former reflecting particular aesthetic taste preferences associated with discourses of ‘civility, enlightenment and intellect’ (Clements, 2006, p. 324). Bourdieu’s approach is sometimes critiqued because of its association with ideas of ‘high’ culture, which have been contested in recent decades on grounds that distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ culture are less important, as people have become more culturally omnivorous, with even high-status individuals being more eclectic in their tastes (de Vries & Reeves, 2022; Peterson & Kern, 1996). However, empirical research also shows that while elite tastes have changed over time, social distinctions continue – driven by elite tastes and consecration practices (see, amongst others, O’Brien & Ianni, 2022; Veenstra, 2015).

In this article, we focus on arts practices as a visible and acknowledged form of cultural expression, precisely *because* arts practices continue to function as social distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) and because people with disabilities are routinely excluded from the capitals that are associated with ‘high’ culture or accepted cultural practices and are instead often relegated to practices understood in terms of health or therapy (see Bang & Kim, 2015, Saur & Johansen, 2013). We argue that employing cultural capital to analyse participation of people with disabilities in the arts is helpful in unveiling how people with disabilities are confined within a certain social status and denied symbolic capital, and also how the arts operate as a series of sub-fields which artists with disabilities seek not just to enter but to transform, achieving thereby a level of social distinction, and also in which broader political struggles are enacted.

## Methods

This article is based on an empirical study carried out as part of a wider research project applying a multi-method approach, which entails a range of interviews with representatives of organisations of people with disabilities and people working on arts and disability across Europe, exploring participants’ perceptions of barriers and facilitators to

cultural participation by people with disabilities.<sup>3</sup> This article focuses on findings from research with representatives of 25 organisations working in the area of arts and disability across 22 European countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Sweden, Spain and UK). While their specific remits vary, all participating organisations are working in arts and disability, engaging with a range of art forms (including visual arts, theatre/performance, dance and mixed art forms). Some are networks or developmental organisations working professionally to create opportunities for people with disabilities to engage more in cultural life, and they often provide training and consultancy, organise events and engage in advocacy. Others are companies of people with disabilities, or integrated companies, whose main focus is artistic creation within a particular art form, and they too are often engaged in networking, education, training and advocacy. Many participants identified themselves as people with disabilities.

In line with best practice in social research, reflection on our positionality as researchers is part of our approach. While we are aware that our status as non-disabled researchers necessarily shapes our understanding and approach to disability, we recognise the importance of centring perspectives of people with disabilities in our work. Through our research, we aim to contribute to a more inclusive society.

A purposive sampling process was pursued to identify arts and disability organisations in each country. Participants received information on the study in advance. Information provided related to issues such as anonymisation, data protection and data storage. Participants gave informed, written consent to participate. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant Maynooth University ethical standards committee (MU Social Research Ethics Subcommittee).

The vast majority of interviews were conducted online, and took place between June 2021 and December 2022. The alternative of completing a written qualitative questionnaire (which sought open-ended or free-text answers) was offered as a form of reasonable accommodation to include participants who might otherwise not have been able to participate. Of the 25 organisations that participated, 20 chose to participate in interviews (and, in the vast majority of cases, they were represented by one person). Written questionnaires were completed by participants from the remaining five organisations.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and transcripts and questionnaires were analysed using a reflexive approach to thematic analysis involving familiarisation; systematic coding; generating initial themes; developing and reviewing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; and writing up (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Clarke & Braun, 2017). For the purposes of the present article, and, drawing on Bourdieu's concepts, the transcripts were coded, and themes developed based on our identification of how the participants perceived that people with disabilities in their countries interacted with cultural fields, especially as creators of art. Thus, we aimed to use theory to interpret empirical data in an endeavour to elaborate the social processes that accompany artistic practices. We quote extracts from interviews to illustrate four themes (outlined in the next section) identifying only the country where each participant was based.

This research was, as mentioned already, carried out as part of a broader research project encompassing 28 countries that investigates the protection of the right of persons

with disabilities to take part in cultural life in the European Union legal order. This article focuses on one aspect of this broader project, specifically qualitative research in which arts and disability organisations participated. They were based in 22 countries. As will be clear from the discussion, commonalities in perceptions around participation in culture were evident across participating countries, and we also signal where some differences were apparent. It is, however, beyond the scope of this article to compare the social situations, or the laws or policies, of the 22 countries, which form the backdrop to participants' perceptions. That being said, it is worth highlighting that some participants perceived that their countries were not as advanced as others either in terms of how disability was approached generally or in affording opportunities for people with disabilities to participate in culture.

## Findings and discussion

We identified four main themes. The first concerns ways in which people with disabilities experience inequalities and exclusion within education. Such marginalisation in educational settings limits opportunities to develop cultural capital – affecting cultural engagement both as audience and as artists. A second theme concerns welfare supports and programmes promoting employment of people with disabilities which hinder professional development in the arts. The third theme concerns experiences of cultural capital by people with disabilities who engage in artistic creation, and how this was understood to challenge norms within a given art form and to aim to transform those art forms. The fourth theme engages with how arts participation is perceived as a challenge to the devaluation of disability in society and as part of a larger political struggle.

### *Limited opportunities to acquire and develop cultural capital*

As participants discussed their work as well as (often) their own experiences, they referred to shortcomings in the education systems of their countries. They sometimes suggested that basic education systems were inadequate for children with disabilities, and failed to develop an appreciation for, or engagement with, the arts, whether as audiences or as professionals, something that could be continued and compounded thereafter by inaccessible cultural offerings. This is the first subtheme we discuss below. Participants also pointed to routine exclusion of people with disabilities from opportunities to develop as professional artists in third level education, which is the second subtheme discussed, and which is linked to exclusion from opportunities to be employed in the arts thereafter.

*Basic education not conducive to developing cultural capital.* Participants often perceived that, from an early stage, the education system contributed to the development of the habitus of people with disabilities in ways that limit participation as both consumers and creators of culture. At a primary level, access to any education for people with disabilities, or for some groups amongst them, was still perceived as problematic in some countries. For example, talking about people with disabilities not developing an interest in the arts, a Romanian participant said that children with severe impairments 'don't have

access to proper education' and a Cypriot participant talked about lack of access to education in the arts because 'disabled children do not go to the same class as the others. They go to special units; they are excluded and stigmatised.' A Swedish participant highlighted how people with disabilities cannot always access after-school state-subsidised education in music and other art forms ('*Kulturskolan*') which is routinely available to other (non-disabled) children. Some participants did not talk about the existence of separate education systems,<sup>4</sup> but still felt that their education systems lacked a focus on developing an interest in the arts for children with disabilities.

Participants also highlighted that some children with disabilities had more opportunities than others. Children whose parents had a level of economic or social capital were able to access arts-education opportunities that others were excluded from, in a classic illustration of Bourdieu's theory of reproduction, where parents within the dominant class nurture 'symbolic mastery' amongst their children from the outset (Atkinson, 2012). For example, a participant from Malta stated that families with 'social and economic capital . . . will find the opportunities available for the potential to grow'. However, a Croatian participant highlighted that accessing most forms of arts education for a disabled child is commercialised and costly and that 'disability and poverty really go hand in hand'. Thus, despite instances of cultural knowledge and reproduction amongst privileged families, poverty – or lack of economic capital – is often associated with having a child with disabilities (Genereaux et al., 2015; Shahat & Greco, 2021; Stabile & Allin, 2012). Participants often referred to experiences of poverty, sometimes perceiving that it could compound challenges even for families who might otherwise wish to cultivate their child's interest in cultural goods and practices. 'Disability', therefore, in conjunction with poverty, is a factor that can create divergences from the general pattern of straightforward reproduction (see also Atkinson, 2012).

Even for people with disabilities whose habitus involved socialisation processes inculcating an interest in arts/culture, inequalities that start within the education system could be reinforced or compounded thereafter by lack of access to cultural venues and institutions as audience, which was widely reported by participants. They often perceived that cultural organisations were limited in the access they provided, sometimes prioritising wheelchair access to buildings and neglecting other forms of access such as to cultural content. Thus, the dispositions inculcated within the 'habitus of disability' (Byrne, 2018, p. 12), related to experiences of educational and other inequalities, could be further mediated by cultural buildings and content that were inaccessible or only accessible when special performances/programmes were intermittently provided, reinforcing habits of not participating, even as audience, and particularly not as artists. For example, a Romanian participant made the point that if you don't get the chance to attend arts events, such as theatres, you are unlikely to 'know if you want to be an actor or not', and a participant from a Cypriot organisation of artists/performers with disabilities said (of people with disabilities in general), 'they not only are not participating as artists but they don't go as viewers as well'.

*Exclusion from professional development and employment.* One issue commonly identified by participants across countries was exclusion from third level education or from opportunities to develop as professional artists. This clearly militates against development of



both cultural and social capital by people with disabilities who wish to develop as artists or arts professionals and prevents them obtaining institutionalised capital, as Bourdieu defines it. For example, a participant from Germany said: 'it [access to arts schools] is appalling, it is really bad in terms of access for arts students', and a Croatian participant observed that the country's drama academy did not have 'one single person with disability enrolled in performing arts, whether it is acting or dancing', adding that 'I think that is shameful'.

This routine exclusion from arts academies was attributed to various issues, including lack of accessible buildings, materials and teaching practices, but also to lack of knowledge and awareness as well as blatant discrimination on the part of the academies in question, which dominate this field, guard access to professional opportunities, and perpetuate relationships of inequality based on negative appraisals of people with disabilities. Participants from Croatia and Greece outlined how, until it was recently challenged, attendance at performing arts school was premised on an explicit requirement that applicants be non-disabled. But such 'structures of domination' were not always acknowledged explicitly by the institutions involved, and could be, as Bourdieu (2000, p. 169) articulates it, 'exercised invisibly and insidiously'. For example, a participant from a Bulgarian organisation outlined multiple ways in which people with disabilities were excluded from cultural opportunities (including poor infrastructure, lack of accessible buildings/content/performances, and poverty that inhibited consumption and creation of art) and suggested that their members would not typically have had the opportunity to study in their chosen art form unless they had done so before experiencing disability. Similarly, a Portuguese participant described insidious processes in the following terms, linking them to negative valuations of the bodies of people with disabilities:

. . . and that starts from artists' schools. We have people who wish to become artists or dancers and they get [to] apply etc., and the answer is no. And the answer is no, not only because the buildings sometimes are not accessible but also because the idea teachers in those schools have of who can be an artist, what kind of bodies can be present on stage, is very limited or perhaps non-existent.

Given these layers of inequalities in arts education and exclusions from related opportunities both to consume and to create art, it is not surprising that participants often perceived that people with disabilities tended not to be employed as artists or arts workers, or adequately consulted or involved at professional, management or decision-making levels within cultural organisations. As a Polish participant said, despite 'good intentions', arts/cultural projects are planned 'from the perspective of the person without the disability' without 'any person with a disability as an organiser'. Several participants felt that people working in the cultural sector did not expect people with disabilities to be artists/performers or arts workers and that it could be very difficult or impossible for a person with disabilities to be employed as an artist or arts professional. For example, for a Slovakian participant, 'quite deep prejudices' made it really hard for a blind person to become a professional actor, and an Irish participant discussed prejudices held by people working in cultural organisations, perceiving that they 'confused the disability very much with a lack of skills, training or performance experience'.

### *Policies hampering development of institutionalised cultural capital*

The second identified theme relates to how artists with disabilities who have overcome barriers to developing skills and cultural capital within the education system or otherwise may still be unable to practise as artists due to welfare policies. Thus, for participants, development of cultural capital associated with institutional recognition is hampered by inflexible welfare systems and by practices of organisations or institutions whose remit focuses on education or employment targeting people with disabilities. The specific shape that these exclusions took differed from country to country, but participants across a range of countries highlighted inability to accept payment for artistic work or to accept grants or residencies from funding bodies due to risk of loss of basic/ongoing disability payments. This was so even though such payments for artistic work tended to be one-off or intermittent, and it resulted in inability to develop professionally alongside other artists. For example, a Danish participant discussed it in these terms: 'I am . . . a visual artist and part of it would be selling my own work, but I am actually not allowed to do this', explaining that if he did so the basis on which he has been assessed for disability supports would be re-evaluated. Not being able to take up such opportunities with non-disabled peers also limited development of social capital.

Limitations due to the way in which employment opportunities targeting people with disabilities were structured were also highlighted. For example, an Irish participant suggested that within State organisations offering training specifically for people with disabilities, 'There is no section on art. There is nothing there to develop a person [with] disability's artistic anything. You are on your own.' A German participant highlighted sheltered workshops for people with intellectual disabilities, which often focused on making crafts, involved low wages, were understood as 'rehabilitation' and forestalled alternative access to the jobs market or career progression for participants who might 'like very much to be professional artists'. On the whole, the experiences discussed here suggest that arts and other fields are structured by a range of concrete interactions, many of which are informed by medical and charitable ideas of disability. This affects not only the potential physical capital vested in the disabled body, 'but also its cultural and symbolic value' (Edwards & Imrie, 2003, p. 248).

### *Experiences of cultural capital on the part of people with disabilities*

Our third theme concerns how, in parallel with accounts of inequalities and exclusions from opportunities to develop cultural capital, participants identified instances in which people *did* get the opportunity to develop as artists and to achieve a level of cultural capital, and of related social capital. Arts participation could, for participants, involve developing tastes, social connections and the symbolic power involved in cultural access and practice, even if that access involved struggle and effort, and although it might require advocacy or support in overcoming barriers to participation. For some participants, it had also involved trying to inform policy-makers and funders over time that art-making by people with disabilities (or art-making that integrated people with disabilities) fitted within an arts remit and not within the field of health/rehabilitation or social care. Artists/performers with disabilities and the work of participants' organisations (and others) were

also perceived as involving efforts to change what constituted taste or value or, in essence, what would be understood as constituting a given art form.

Thus, even though it is often the case that ‘dispositions constituting the habitus are durable and cannot be easily transformed’ (Byrne, 2018, p. 12), participants outlined how creating art could involve achieving access to opportunities not accessible in other spheres of life and/or how their work had achieved mainstream arts recognition. For example, an Irish participant talked about the arts as an area in which she could ‘work to my strengths and could compete with non-disabled’ people. Participants from several countries highlighted instances of individual artists or companies integrating people with disabilities who had become recognised as mainstream artists, or as people who now operated in their country’s valorised cultural field. For instance, a Finnish participant discussed how their theatre company had started out decades ago ‘at the margins’, but had recently received a mainstream theatre award, which meant breaking out of the category to which they had been relegated:

And then slowly, slowly we did performances, we cooperated with different kinds of actors in the field and we are more and more accepted . . . when we for the first time received an award that was meant not for a group of artists with disabilities but for any theatre; that was quite a big thing for us because it meant that we had been working our way in towards the centre. We were seen as one of the other theatres.

Likewise, a Croatian participant highlighted how a theatre that included blind and visually impaired artists engages in great performances ‘with different professional actors and directors . . . [and] are respected, like they get the reviews as professional[s]’. That was against a backdrop in which that participant perceived that people with disabilities experience a lot of discrimination and poverty and were not considered ‘important for Croatian society’. She discussed the audiences for the integrated performance company in which she works, perceiving that they were comprised mainly of conventional ‘high’ arts attendees who did not for the most part include people with disabilities. As she said, audiences attend to ‘see our performances from this angle of high art performativity’. In other words, the company has achieved a level of symbolic capital and broken out from relegation to a category associated only with the ‘social’ or the ‘therapeutic’. While appreciating this on one level, the participant felt that connecting with a community of disabled people who might attend was ‘very, very hard’ and that it meant that such cultural performances could be perceived by many people with disabilities as distant from their taste or experience.

Simultaneously, participants sometimes discussed how their approaches, and those of other companies of artists with disabilities, involved comprehending existing artistic codes but also changing them by working in ways that are different to mainstream artistic expression, perceiving this work as potentially transformative of the artistic fields in which they operate. For example, a representative of a Czech organisation characterised his performance group as a ‘real artistic platform which can communicate with our audience’ and which simultaneously ‘is a little bit different than the mainstream’. Similarly, and echoing insights articulated within critical disability studies that ‘disabled bodies challenge normative ideas of able bodies’ (Goodley, 2013, p. 635), a Croatian participant

linked the experience of disability to the opportunity to transform art forms, suggesting that it was appropriate to demonstrate a questioning of 'ableism in dance' and that it was possible to 'push the field . . . [to] change the discipline, they [disabled performers] change the art form . . . it is really this idea of inclusive society, utopian equality but you can embody it on stage'. An Italian participant articulated eloquently the changes sought, acknowledging and challenging the current situation in which people with disabilities could be considered to be 'poor' or to be 'pitied'. Instead, this participant suggested that people with disabilities brought a new 'horizon' to the arts they practised, saying:

Incredible things . . . can be borrowed from the encounter between disability and art . . . because beyond these borders you can see new things.

Relatedly, participants talked about the need for changes in approach within cultural institutions and among arts workers, which could be perceived as 'exclusive' and whose staff continued to adhere to standards and processes that excluded people with disabilities. This included, for example, a participant from Malta who instanced arts professionals who worked in lighting resisting changes necessary for relaxed performances<sup>5</sup> because they perceived it as contrary to their 'artistic ethos'. Participants also sometimes commented that the hierarchical structures of mainstream companies/organisations are not conducive to new forms of expression. For example, a Swedish participant described a project involving people with disabilities and a symphony orchestra which required a new approach: 'to do something completely different', adding that 'something in the structure of the whole institution . . . might need to change'.

Undergirding these processes of change, participants sometimes referred to accessibility measures, such as sign-language interpretation or audio-description, as intrinsic to their own artistic processes and how this was central to the outcomes of their work. They contrasted this with approaches within mainstream arts practices that sought to be accessible, but where accessibility measures were only added at the end. For example, one participant from Finland characterised accessibility as an 'artistic strategy and inspiration' rather than 'something you add on later', and which changes 'whose stories are told'. This participant and others are operating from the perspective that 'disability' is central to both humanity and to art (see Howe et al., 2016).

Overall, participants often linked their work to efforts to contribute to changes in what constitutes 'legitimate' art, to achieving high professional standards but with new forms of expression in which disability and accessibility are intrinsic and generative (not subsequent add-ons). They often talked about attracting audiences comprised of people both with and without disabilities and, in some cases, largely from typical attendees of 'high' art/cultural offerings. They were aware that political processes were highly relevant to embedding what is considered acceptable or unacceptable taste (Clements, 2006), and they seek to change the fields in which they operate, rejecting the subtle and not-so-subtle practices that legitimate marginalisation of artists (and also audiences) with disabilities from the mainstream.

However, and crucially, instances of development of cultural capital were often associated with particular individuals or with specific projects or organisations/institutions sometimes supported by EU funding. These examples often operated on a project-to-project

basis and did not always have ongoing financial support for staff. They were often highlighted by participants who perceived that policy-making and funding processes in their countries (from the top down) were not sufficiently supportive and were not well-informed on disability issues. This included perceptions that funders still operated from assumptions that disability art was therapeutic or social in nature and that they also often underestimated expenses involved in making culture accessible. Thus, exclusion of people with disabilities from opportunities to develop cultural capital, especially to develop professionally as artists and arts workers, was perceived to operate at a more general level within their countries (as discussed above) with prejudices about who and what kinds of bodies could become artists or arts professionals continuing to marginalise people with disabilities. However, our analysis suggests that some people with disabilities now experience the cultural and social capital involved in access to cultural fields, are beginning to be recognised as holders of that symbolic capital within society more broadly, and, in many cases, to be working to have greater control over their representation and to transform the art forms to which they contribute. However, Darke (2003, p. 139) warns that small numbers of artists with disabilities operating within 'a traditional art habitus' does not necessarily result in transformation. Participants often perceived that challenges to traditional arts fields need to be part of broader change in society in respect of disability and that the arts can also contribute to that change, which is the next (and last) theme we discuss.

### *Cultural participation as challenge to devaluation of disability*

Participants' perceptions of the arts as a field with potential to be transformed by involvement of people with disabilities were linked to ideas of opportunities for expressions of new ways of being in (or of understanding) the world. This is consistent with scholarship within disability studies, foregrounding how the arts can challenge devaluations of people with disabilities more generally in societies (see Jakubowicz & Meekosha, 2003; Sandahl, 2018; Siebers, 2006). Thus, notwithstanding arguments that tastes have become more omnivorous (Peterson & Kern, 1996), participants perceived that 'high' culture still plays an important role in the transmission of social power and was one where they could challenge the dominant order.

The artistic focus and quality of participants' work was often stressed (which might or might not deal explicitly with experiences of disability), but, crucially, they linked high artistic standards with challenges to the devaluation and exclusion of people with disabilities more broadly. For example, as a Greek participant put it, even though the primary goal of his work is artistic, he also felt that 'when you are a disabled person, when you are on stage this is an activist act'. Similarly, a UK participant said that:

Theatre is the thing that drives the company, that is the most essential part of what we do, creative theatre writing, directing. And actually for me I think theatre is the best way to challenge and change perceptions of who we are and possibilities, and that in itself is huge advocacy.

A participant from an organisation of visual artists with disabilities in Bulgaria talked about the communication process that inheres in creating art, suggesting that the art they

create ‘helps other people to enter in their world, to speak the same language’. For that participant, art was an enrichment at a personal level, an opportunity to express original ideas, and a way to create greater equality in society: ‘Art is the best care we can offer ourselves and each other and we believe that it is a path to true equality between people.’

Thus, participants often saw themselves as contributing to greater equality, greater expressions of diversity, and to increasing capacity for influence by people with disabilities, and not just in the field of arts. A Portuguese participant characterised the transformational potential of culture as requiring a changed ‘mindset’ at a societal level, one where ‘each one can have the possibility to be the best they can [be]’, suggesting that it was important to transcend individual access issues such as ‘free entries or digital content’ and, instead, for cultural participation to be understood as fundamental to societies, stating that cultural ‘access is about creating the conditions for someone to be wherever they want to be . . . And having conditions to do it without help.’ Another participant, this time from Cyprus, stressed how difficult life was for people with disabilities, saying, ‘In Cyprus the disability culture is totally something new . . . The State does not afford us ways to be included.’ But this participant also asserted that making art involved visibility and influence: ‘This is our way to show that we are here and that we make our mark in the society.’ Participants’ accounts evidence that they are working not just for greater expression on the part of people with disabilities, but, to echo the words of Darke (2003, p. 132), they link their artistic work to a more accurate picture of society, life, and art itself.

Although participants perceived the need for more systematic approaches to access and participation and for further opening up of opportunities for people with disabilities to participate in and to influence arts and culture (as well as other aspects of society), they sometimes articulated how their work aimed for transformation not only of particular cultural fields associated with ‘high’ culture, but also, and intrinsically linked to this, in how disability is understood in societies. Our analysis reveals how making art provides opportunities to exert a form of cultural power, particularly effective in ‘symbolic struggles for the production and imposition of the legitimate vision of the world’ (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 69; Citroni, 2020). In this way, participants link the cultural and political and engage in no less an endeavour than attempting to influence the distribution of symbolic and material resources. Thus, while participants recognise that the lives of people with disabilities are connected to different ‘valuations’ of corporeal forms, and to systems of signification and representation which underpin them (Edwards & Imrie, 2003), they also recognise that these are not fixed but are context-specific and they are working to make them amenable to change. However, arguably, participants also perceived that it will not be, as Byrne (2018, p. 12) argues, ‘until the habitus of the non-disabled population is effectively transformed via the internalisation of “new” dispositions that we will see substantive change’. As a Bulgarian participant put it: ‘the crux of it is that society and especially politics must change to allow for this big transformation’.

## **Concluding remarks**

Bourdieu’s theories are relevant to an analysis of participation by people with disabilities in arts and culture. This is not just because, in common with contemporary critical/cultural

approaches to theorising disability, they transcend various dualisms and emphasise the role of culture in the production and reproduction of inequalities. They also recognise an intrinsic link between cultural capital and bodies as bearers of symbolic value, value that is defined and determined by dominant forces within fields that *inter alia* structure who gets to learn, attend, create and determine what is valued.

The empirical analysis presented shows how societal ideas that associate disability with medical and charitable ideas affect the opportunities to create art available to people with disabilities and, thus, affect access to cultural and symbolic value and confine them to a habitus of disability. They experience inequalities within different levels of education and professional development as well as welfare systems that can inhibit professional engagement in the arts. This, as well as poverty associated with disability, can limit development of cultural and social capital and create divergences from the general pattern of straightforward social reproduction. Thus, the analysis unveils ongoing effects of a range of structural barriers hindering arts participation by people with disabilities. However, the analysis also shows how participants are working in the arts in European countries in ways that they perceive as having potential to challenge and shift perceptions and transform traditional aesthetic values – they are working to transform the artistic fields in which they operate through processes in which disability and accessibility are central and generative (an ‘inspiration’) not added at the end of a mainstream creative process. They are aware that engaging in arts creation has a value as social distinction and of its challenge to societal prejudices and to practices to which people with disabilities are routinely relegated. Furthermore, while the primary focus of many participants was the creation of art and on high artistic standards, they see this as closely aligned to contributing to tackling societal norms and exclusionary practices more broadly. Participants’ endeavours to transform the arts fields in which they operate, as well as how they linked this to potential to change society more broadly, is also consistent with Bourdieu’s emphasis on the pivotal role of ‘high’ culture in the transmission of wider inequalities and social power. Specifically, while elite tastes may have become more omnivorous, they continue to drive social distinctions, and this is key to why art-making becomes a means of resistance to cultural reproduction that confines disability within medicalised or charitable approaches. Thus, our analysis sheds new light on how Bourdieu’s theoretical toolkit is still relevant to work on arts and disability that aims to challenge how disability is understood (and related to) in societies at a more general level and to contribute to the political struggle of people with disabilities.

To realise the potential of work by people with disabilities in the arts, disability policy and cultural policy need to operate more closely. Policy-making and arts practice need to become more amenable to influence by people with disabilities at all levels in more systematic ways, including throughout different levels of education and in cultural employment and decision-making fora. Associations of people working in arts and disability would benefit also from being part of networks through which they could share learnings from efforts to transform the fields in which they operate as well as their contributions to the politics of disability.

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## Notes

1. In this article we deliberately use the terms ‘people/persons with disabilities’ and ‘disabled people’ interchangeably. We acknowledge that the term ‘disabled people’ tends to be used in UK scholarship to highlight that people with impairments are disabled by environmental and societal barriers. However, we also recognise that the term ‘persons with disabilities’ emphasises the person and aligns with the human rights model of disability put forward in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
2. When we refer to ‘political struggles’ we refer to all struggles that aim to affect the distribution of material and symbolic resources (Büyükokutan, 2011).
3. The project is called ‘Protecting the Right to Culture of Persons with Disabilities and Enhancing Cultural Diversity through European Union Law: Exploring New Paths – DANCING’ and has received funding from the European Research Council.
4. In Europe, special education continues, occurring in varying proportions in different countries (García-Carrión et al., 2018).
5. ‘Relaxed performances’ encourage attendance at mainstream productions especially by audiences with autism or intellectual disability and may include reduced intensity lighting and sound, and provision of visual stories to familiarise theatre-goers with the production (Fletcher-Watson, 2015).

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