

Inequality and the saying, “It’s who you know, not what you know,” by J*seph R*z

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Abstract. This paper considers whether the saying, “It’s who you know, not what you know” can be used instead of jargon-laden studies of inequality. I argue that it is not a good replacement in some cases and present a challenge to standard Bourdieusian explanations of inequality in some fields. The paper is written as a pastiche of the distinguished political philosopher Joseph Raz.

Joseph Raz polarizes readers, but is it because of his political stances or, paradoxically even, “Some pleasures should be discouraged”? I imitated Raz’s writing style in 2011 from sheer enchantment and I thought I would try again, though I doubt I can get closer.

Political philosophers respond to the fact of inequality, and they are joined in doing so by members of a number of other academic fields and also the public in general. Responses go beyond papers; some take the form of jokes or sayings. A saying used by English speakers to explain unjust inequality is “It’s who you know, not what you know.” Long and jargon-laden studies of inequality often leave the impression that they are communicating the same thing. What though is the saying meant to convey; what exactly does this saying say? An objection that may be put forward against its role as a substitute is that its meaning is insufficiently clear.

Below are three interpretations:

- (A) If two candidates apply for the same job and both have the essential knowledge for that job and the same relevant knowledge overall, but one does not have certain

irrelevant social connections and the other does, that other person will be preferred – *the social-plus interpretation*.

(B) If two candidates apply for the same job and both have the essential knowledge for that job and one has knowledge desirable for it but without certain irrelevant social connections, whereas the other does not have this desirable knowledge but has the social connections, the other will be preferred – *the social-more-desirable interpretation*.

(C) If two candidates apply for the same job and one has the essential knowledge for the job but does not have certain irrelevant social connections, whereas the other does not have the essential knowledge for the job but has the social connections, the other person will be preferred – *the social-over-essential interpretation*.

There are other interpretations, but it seems that what the saying is trying to convey is captured by (C). That interpretation makes best sense of its use of “not.” I cannot see that the saying is unclear enough for this objection to work.

There is a further objection, which is that some works of research appeal to social connections in explaining inequality in a way that is not captured by the saying. All three interpretations overlook another way in which social connections lead to inequality, though it is no revelation. Who one knows (or whom one knows?) can often play a large role in determining what one knows. An example is if one is tasked to write on whether what counts as real is relative to a system of concepts, and one desires to make the objection that two systems can only divide up reality differently if there is a non-relative continuum to divide up. Has anyone made this objection before? Suitably-informed friends tell you about discussions which are difficult to locate in any other way, for some fall within titles referring to general themes and some within titles referring to specific philosophers (e.g. Tallis 1995: 52-53). The

discussions are scattered. Perhaps some time in the future one can instruct a computer, “Tell me about who has made this objection” and an exhaustive list will appear, but at present most or all people do not have this solution. One person and another have the same talent for undertaking the evaluative task, but the other person’s social connections enable them to get closer to completion, because they are aware of what has been said before.

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is renowned for his attempts to explain why some fields are dominated by people from a narrow set of backgrounds. He introduces concepts of four kinds of capital, but the explanations for which he is well-known in the English-speaking world focus more on two kinds, namely cultural and economic. Features of style which do not transparently bear significance for a job and are easier to achieve if brought up in a certain affluent class, with its associated customs and habits, play an important role in selection, such as conversation style, dress style, writing style (Gell 1992: 272; Pinto 1999: 104). Skills in manifesting stylistic qualities Bourdieu refers to as cultural capital. These Bourdieusian explanations of inequality underestimate the extent to which social connections provide one with advantageous knowledge, largely independent of style – a wide range of stylistic options can be successfully pursued. In some elite institutions, one can obtain a lot of the more relevant information for various tasks through social connections. This prevents oversights, such as when producing commentaries and other literature. There is an argument in favour of explanations which focus on the quality of one’s network of social connections, on social capital, rather than shared cultural style.¹

¹ [I have examined a case in more detail before. In that case, inequality in social connections seems to play a minor role at best in explaining a weakness, but in other cases the role may well be larger. See Edward 2022. The material also overlaps with yesterday’s paper, but not the day before’s. However, it strangely disappeared.]

References

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