

Seilhamer, Mark Fifer. (2019). *Gender, Neoliberalism and Distinction through Linguistic Capital: Taiwanese Narratives of Struggle and Strategy*. (Volume 15) (Encounters 15). Multilingual Matters, 232 pp. ISBN: 978-788923019.

Reviewed by Timo Savela¹

Gender, Neoliberalism and Distinction Through Linguistic Capital: Taiwanese Narratives of Struggle and Strategy, is an aptly titled book as, on one hand, it focuses on gender, neoliberalism, distinction and linguistic capital, and, on the other hand, it addresses these issues through narratives that pertain to everyday struggles and strategies that seek to address and overcome these struggles in the Taiwanese context. The title lives up to the expectations that it creates for the reader. If you keep the title in mind while reading the book, the author, Mark Seilhamer, provides reading that is not only coherent but also informative and, above all, pleasant to read. As the issues discussed in the book are rather complex and intertwined, addressing them in book format benefits the reader, something which Seilhamer is keenly aware of. Had these issues been addressed in a journal article or a number of journal articles, it is likely that it would have resulted in dense, if not tiresome reading. Some may take issue with the author's somewhat informal and candid style, but I think it meshes well with the narrative approach, making the book more accessible to non-academics. Overall the book comes across as approachable and easy to read, even to people who are not familiar with the issues discussed in the book.

Seilhamer provides an overview of the book in the introduction, supplying the reader a summary that eases the reader into a complex and multifaceted topic. As already hinted by book title, the introduction makes it further apparent that the book is markedly Bourdieusard in its approach to a topic that focuses on the acquisition and utilization of linguistic capital by Taiwanese women who seek to distinguish themselves in the highly competitive neoliberal Taiwanese job market. Before explaining the structure of his book, the author briefly discusses the link between the central concept of the book, distinction, and the emphasis Taiwanese people tend to put on education. The introduction is useful to anyone who, like me, has limited knowledge of Taiwanese society and history because it not only addresses Taiwan's relationship with the People's Republic of China and the authoritarian rule of the island by the

¹ Department of English, Faculty of Humanities, University of Turku, Turku, Finland, timo.savela@utu.fi

Kuomintang, what people may already be aware of, but also its colonial history which helps the reader to understand Taiwanese attitudes towards foreign languages and the prestige associated with them, especially with the English language.

Following the introduction, the book can be divided into three parts. The first part, consisting of chapters 2, 3 and 4, covers the theoretical underpinnings of the book. In general, those already familiar with Bourdieu's sociology, neoliberalism and/or narrative study may skip the chapters, whereas those unfamiliar with these theoretical issues would do well to go through these chapters as otherwise the rest of the book may prove to be hard to follow. Despite being familiar with these topics, I found these chapters to be well formulated, elaborating multiple central concepts, such as capital, field, habitus and practice, being concise yet not dense. This makes the book approachable to anyone interested in issues pertaining to gender, neoliberalism, distinction and linguistic capital. Moreover, Seilhamer not only covers these concepts in the abstract, but also explains their function in contemporary Taiwan, with particular emphasis on the Taiwanese education system, the central setting for the narratives of struggle and strategy contained in the book. Therefore, those familiar with the central concepts but unfamiliar with Taiwanese society may want to read this chapter prior to going through the narratives. It is also in this part of the book that Seilhamer elaborates on his qualitative approach to the topics indicated in the title and his own role, vis-à-vis the participants of his study. It is commendable that not only does he mention his own role in the process of narrative inquiry that emphasizes the role of the participants, letting them freely narrate their experiences rather than using snippets of their views as mere seasoning, but he also explicitly addresses his role and the limitations that come with it. Furthermore, he is careful to explain that narrative inquiry does not seek to uncritically promote the views of the participants as the narratives are seen as acts of self-presentation, truthful or not, rather than as the experiences of the narrators in themselves.

The second part of the book consists of four narratives, each containing a distinct self-presentation that revolves around distinction, distinguishing oneself from others in terms of linguistic capital, standing out in a crowd of people in order to be hired, having that competitive edge over others in the neoliberal job market. It is worth emphasizing that there are certain changes in all of the narratives as time goes by. This allows Seilhamer to gain a better understanding of these self-presentations. The first narrative focuses on an individual who comes to identify herself as an intellectual who makes use of her linguistic capital in order to invest in worldly knowledge, what one could call cultural capital. The second narrative presents an individual who utilizes her linguistic capital to make connections with other people, that is to say gain social capital. The third narrative is different from the other two in terms of its variable goals. In this case the individual makes use of her linguistic capital in order to develop herself according to shifting goals that are linked to succeeding in the job market. The fourth narrative is similar to the third narrative in the sense that both individuals strive to succeed. However, it also differs from the third narrative in the sense that the fourth individual seeks to make use of linguistic capital to succeed, for the sake of succeeding. At first, Seilhamer's analysis of her as a fierce competitor may seem somewhat inconsistent, considering that her frustration and loss of confidence in her abilities force her to change her views. However, the analysis is consistent once one takes into account how such extreme competitiveness may result in a deemed failure.

The fourth part of the book summarizes and reassesses the narratives, followed by conclusions and a postscript in which the author and the narrators look back at their own narration. This part is particularly useful as it reminds the reader of certain underlying factors that one may lose track while reading the four narrative chapters, such as the importance of gender, education and local languages in Taiwanese society. For example, Seilhamer highlights how gender roles may help Taiwanese women in accruing social capital, making connections, as societal norms make it more acceptable for the women

to have relationships with foreign men than it is for Taiwanese men to have relationships with foreign women. This, of course, applies only to certain women, those deemed attractive and desirable by foreign men, which could be deemed as problematic. However, it can also be seen as permitting women to exert more active agency than they could in the company of Taiwanese men due to the influence of local norms. Furthermore, Seilhamer also reminds the reader of the importance of economic capital, especially that of one's parents, as it provides the means to gain linguistic capital, which, in turn, is expected to be convertible to other forms of capital, especially economic capital once one reaches the job market. The author recognizes that this is a troubling issue as, on one hand, using money to educate one's child is arguably a positive thing, at least for the child, yet, on the other hand, as not everyone has the necessary capital to do so, this will likely function to maintain existing socioeconomic inequality, if not exacerbate it, as the children will likely come to reproduce the existing states of affairs in the social fields they are positioned in once they reach adulthood. In addition, it is likely that this is further reinforced by the general positive view of western countries and a deeply held assumption that women are better at language learning. These factors push women to learn western languages, which, in turn, allows them to gain distinction through the accumulation of various forms of capital via linguistic capital.

As a final note, while linguistic capital seems to allow women more opportunities to gain distinction, it may not be enough to alter the role of women in society, as indicated by Seilhamer. The narrators see themselves as often relegated to doing linguistic grunt work in male dominated companies. In other words, women would seem to have the necessary capital to achieve distinction and thus gain status and higher remuneration for their work. However, their capital is deemed feminine, which creates challenges for them in achieving distinction. They have to struggle to prove their value, despite holding valuable linguistic capital that can be highly beneficial to companies, as identified in the postscript. Seilhamer ends with a positive note, stating that change is possible in this regard. It is, nonetheless, a slow process as it may run contrary to immediate interests of those who stand to lose in such a changing society, which explains the narrators' experiences.