

Legitimacy, Cultural Production, and *Top Chef*

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Introduction

Women and minorities are notably underrepresented in the upper echelons of the culinary industry (Harris and Giuffre 2010). Scholarship on the perpetuation of this trend draws from the realm of organizational structure and culture (Acker 2012; Druckman 2010) and the sociology of cultural production, the struggle between dominate and dominated classes within the field of culinary arts to maintain positions of power relative to one another (Bourdieu 1983).

This paper explores how the intersecting realms of cultural production of food as culinary art and systemic inequalities are depicted in popular media. Considering the importance of media in representing and supporting existing social and cultural norms and expectations, it is important to explore the way inequalities in the culinary industry are reenacted in the popular realm of reality-tv cooking competitions. Bravo TV's *Top Chef* features contestants with prestigious pedigrees and ample experience, removing it from the realm of amateur competition and elevating the chefs and food to the level of culinary production.

Research Questions

How is legitimacy as a “Chef” established, debated, and potentially negated on TV’s *Top Chef* ? Do requirements for establishing cultural capital vary by race or gender?

Previous Research

Previous research has highlighted how value fields of cultural production is created and distributed. Stokes (2015) found that when the making of clothes was elevated to the realm of art or cultural production, the idea of fashion was divorced from the seamstress making clothes for her family and elevated to the competitive realm of men “driven by individual creativity”, removed from economic concern but focused on “originality, innovation, complexity, and seriousness” (222-223). Similarly, Johnston et al. (2014) identified gendered culinary personas in cookbooks that follow patterns of women as caregivers and men as professionals. Female personas included images of the “homebody”, the “homestylist”, and the “pin-up” which “gloss over {the chef’s} culinary education and business acumen in lieu of an emphasis on domestic skills" (9). While male personas of the “chef-artisan” and the “culinary maverick” present male chefs as possessing “artistic genius” that is made more legitimate through formal training, professional kitchen experience, and the honing of skills (13). Swenson (2009) found a similar pattern of men and women being depicted with different experience and motivation in *Food Network* shows. For example, while Emeril Lagasse discusses his restaurant and professional successes, Paula Deen "{invites} audience members to join her behind the stove and {answers} personal questions about her life and family" (43).

Findings

Three main themes emerged from my analysis the judges’ and contestants’ critiques and interactions.

- I found that chefs and judges differentiate between food that requires specific knowledge, skill, or taste to enjoy or prepare and food that is easily “digestible” by the common American.
 - Kenny’s beet salad is “**done through the guise of hamburger helper**” Tom Colicchio
 - Sara’s chicken dish, served with the foot intact, announces itself “**as not a supermarket chicken**” -Anthony Bourdain
 - Dale “**looks like he’s working at Denny’s**” - Geoffrey Zacharian
- I found that ‘rags-to-riches’ stories are used in ways that allow for cultural validity to be extended to chefs that are outside of the traditional white upper class hegemonic masculine ideal of ‘chef’.

- Kenny was cooking as soon as he “could stand up to the stove” and “**scrambled {his} first egg when {he} was 3 years old.**”
- Hung, arguably the most technically proficient, French trained chef in Season 3, never mentions his training but focuses discussions of his ability on immersion in food and the restaurant industry: How he “**grew up in the kitchen...sleeping in the kitchen...** cooking all {his} life”, his “**whole family bloodline is in this industry**”.

- Finally, I found that individual ‘chefs’ are imbued with and judged by both experience and gender qualities that carry their own implicit limitations.

- Howie accuses Joey of “**bitch{ing} like a little girl**”.
- Adam **praises** Gregory’s choice to make a trio for its **ambition** by equating it to Gregory having a large phallus (“**Hi, my name’s Greg and this is how big my dick is**”).

Conclusion

The judges’ critiques and contestants’ comments and interactions on *Top Chef* produce discourse around the cultural value and validity of the contestants’ person and product. The findings seem to imply that the general qualities of food/dishes and the nature of the unidentified/ambiguous ‘chef’ receive value through distinctions of class, race, and status. While *Top Chef* provides a seemingly level playing field with similar proportions of men/women, white/minority, and formally/non-formally trained contestants, the contestants themselves still enact the creation and definition of boundaries for access to legitimacy in fine dining based around gender, class and racial lines. While food may be valued similarly based on the characteristics of the chef, the value is determined by its distance from food associated with the masses.

Social Implications and Future Research

- The recurrent use of the American Dream and self-made man narratives are a two-fold back-handed compliment. At once they distance the recipient from the qualities of value given to other cultural producers (skill, art, creativity, passion), devaluing them in the process. Secondly, they cement the perceived differences between groups in society at large, that they are inherently of a different level.
- The use of sexualized and derogatory language reifies the idea that women are cooks more than chefs, and male chefs that have never held the position of executive chef are feminized by their lack of experience.
- Future research should expand to more seasons and episodes to verify the consistency and endurance of findings.
- This nature of research could be expanded to other realms of cultural production.

References

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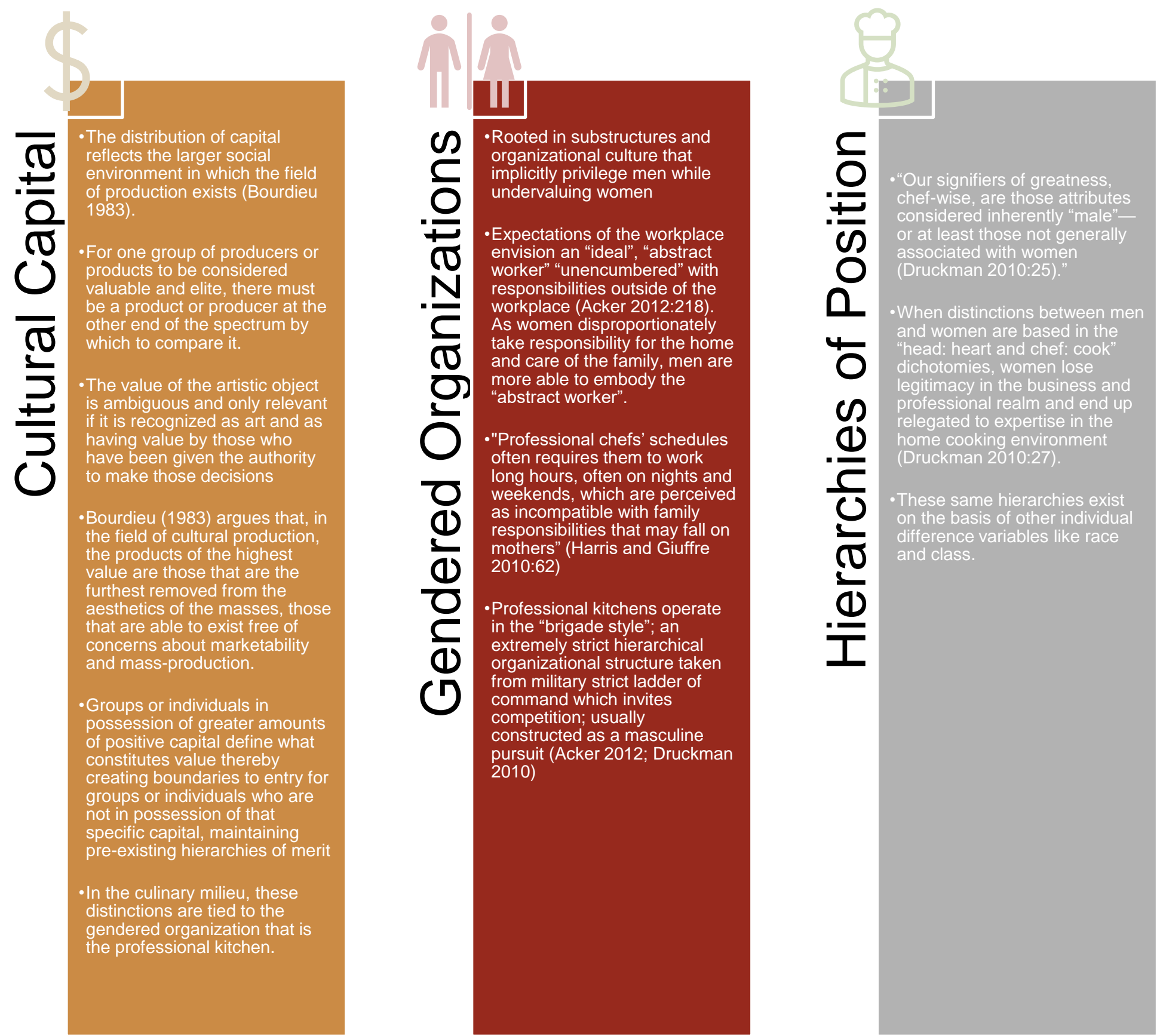
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Background



Methodology

I conducted a thematic content analysis of 12 episodes across 3 seasons of *Top Chef*. Following procedures described by Esterberg (2002), I rooted my analysis in grounded theory.

