

Bourdieu, Habitus and Social Research

The Art of Application



Edited by Cristina Costa and
Mark Murphy



Bourdieu, Habitus and Social Research

Also by Mark Murphy

HABERMAS, CRITICAL THEORY AND EDUCATION (*with T. Fleming*, 2012)

SOCIAL THEORY AND EDUCATION RESEARCH (2013)

SOCIAL THEORY AND EDUCATION RESEARCH: Understanding Foucault,
Habermas, Bourdieu and Derrida (2013)

RESEARCH AND EDUCATION (*with W. Curtis and S. Shields*, 2014)

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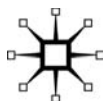
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Contents

Acknowledgements vii

Notes on Contributors viii

Part I An Introduction to Bourdieuan Habitus

- 1 Bourdieu and the Application of Habitus across the Social Sciences 3
Cristina Costa and Mark Murphy

Part II Habitus, Transitions and Trajectories

- 2 Egalitarian Habitus: Narratives of Reconstruction in Discourses of Aspiration and Change 21
Garth Stahl
- 3 From Parental to Adolescents' Habitus: Challenges and Insights When Quantifying Bourdieu 39
Katerina Bodovski
- 4 Habitus and Graduate Employment: A Re/Structured Structure and the Role of Biographical Research 55
Ciaran Burke
- 5 Theorising and Researching the Youth Crime Nexus: Habitus, Reflexivity and the Political Ecology of Social Practices 74
Alan France

Part III Habitus Transformed: The Effects of Mobility

- 6 Habitus: Its Transformation and Transfer through Cultural Encounters in Migration 93
Magdalena Nowicka
- 7 Learning to Fly: Entering the Youth Mobility Field and Habitus in Ireland and Portugal 111
David Cairns

8	Moving to the City: Educational Trajectories of Rural Chinese Students in an Elite University <i>He Li</i>	126
Part IV Online Habitus		
9	Academics Online: Fighting for a New Habitus <i>Cristina Costa</i>	151
10	Young People and the Web: Understanding Their Engagement with Online Information through the Concept of Habitus <i>Huw Davies</i>	167
	<i>Index</i>	183

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We would like to express our gratitude to the contributors in this edited collection, as their involvement in the book has resulted in a truly interdisciplinary endeavour. Such books can be a challenge to pull off, but the authors included here made the task an enjoyable and rewarding one. They also represent a larger community of practice which is busy putting Bourdieu to work across a wide range of research contexts. We also acknowledge this wider contribution and hope we have done this community justice in the production of this text.

As editors, we also have our own more immediate community of research practitioners, which revolves around our website, www.social-theoryapplied.com. This growing community comprises scholars who are working with social theory in their research, many of whom engage with Bourdieu's concepts as part of their methods and analysis. These scholars have made a strong contribution to this book, providing us with extra incentive to develop and deliver such a text, while also acting as an invisible guiding hand in our approach to the content. We view this book as a contribution to the ongoing discussions about social theory and research methods that occur on- and off-site, whether these involve Bourdieu or not. Our hope is that its intended audience, in our own little corner of the digital public sphere, will appreciate this book.

Notes on Contributors

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Part I

An Introduction to Bourdieuian Habitus

1

Bourdieu and the Application of Habitus across the Social Sciences

Cristina Costa and Mark Murphy

Introduction

In his quest to transcend a set of interconnected dichotomies – structure-agency, subjectivism/objectivism, theory/practice – Pierre Bourdieu created a set of thinking tools that allowed him to explore different sociological phenomena, phenomena such as educational inequality, cultural reproduction, social positioning and mobility, class and distinction, to name a few. In doing so, Bourdieu devised a set of relational concepts whose application aimed to understand, explain and disclose inequalities at different layers of society. These concepts were not meant to be used solely as theory, but rather as a theory-method, which became his career-long attempt to bridge the divide between theory and practice.

These thinking tools, including capital, field, habitus, doxa, and symbolic violence, are some of the best-known constructs developed by the French sociologist. Since gaining currency in the Anglophone world and further afield, Bourdieu's concepts have been applied to a wide range of disciplines, influencing a variety of knowledge areas. Habitus is one of Bourdieu's key thinking tools that has in recent years become more prominent. The conceptualisation of habitus is a reflection of Bourdieu's attempt to overcome the dichotomy between structure and agency whilst acknowledging the external and historical factors that condition, restrict and/or promote change.

Habitus – the focus of this book – has a special place in Bourdieu's set of research tools, not least because it allows researchers to explain how and why social agents conceive and (re)construct the social world in which they are inserted. With habitus, Bourdieu tried to access internalised behaviours, perceptions, and beliefs that individuals carry with them and which, in part, are translated into the practices they transfer

to and from the social spaces in which they interact. Habitus is thus more than accumulated experience; it is a complex social process in which individual and collective ever-structuring dispositions develop in practice to justify individuals' perspectives, values, actions and social positions. Just as importantly, habitus can be seen as much as an agent of continuity and tradition as it can be regarded as a force of change.

Even though Bourdieu endeavoured throughout his career to reconcile theory with practice by developing a robust sociological lens through which the social world can be apprehended, understood and explained, his legacy has arguably made a bigger impression as theory than it has done as methodology. The aim of this book is to look at habitus as both a theoretical construct and method. By bringing together a range of experts in the field, we want to develop a stronger understanding of the 'art of application' when it comes to habitus – through which mechanisms can research 'capture', operationalise and theorise habitus?

Central to fulfilling this objective is an exploration of the diverse ways in which habitus has been applied in social research, which is why the collection includes chapters exploring habitus in relation to issues such as:

- Education
- Social and economic mobility
- Migration
- Youth and crime
- Digital practices

As a preface to these contributions, this chapter is designed to provide a brief introduction to the concept and context of habitus, while also outlining in summary form the organisation and content of the book. Also included here is an indication of some of the issues and challenges researchers have faced when developing their own art of application in the context of habitus, which, while not intended to be exhaustive, should provide some contribution to the ongoing debates about the role of social theory in social research.

It should be noted that such challenges are not the exclusive domain of researchers grappling with Bourdieu's conceptual apparatus; most variants of social theory come with their own set of surprises for scholars keen to bring deeper meanings to their data sets. In effect, the case studies included in this volume could be seen as a collective example of a much wider research agenda geared towards bringing theory and method closer together (see Murphy, 2013). Habitus as a concept is

but one among many which have helped us make sense of issues like inequality and social stratification, but it is hoped that the kinds of discussions included in this collection have wider application outside of the subfield of Bourdieu studies.

These wider applications have to some extent been portrayed and discussed via the website www.socialtheoryapplied.com, which is co-edited by this collection's co-editors. The developing interest in the website and its contributions is further testimony to the significance attached to the art of application by scholars who are keen on exploring the power of ideas but uncertain as to how to realize their potential in the field of research. We see the production of books such as this edited collection and the website as overlapping parts of an ongoing project to focus on 'application', an essential component of research agendas, while helping to raise its status in the binary world of theory/method distinctions.

Bourdieu: A brief overview and introduction

Bourdieu's critical sociology is an attempt to understand and represent practice within the constraints of the social world, in that it seeks to bridge the difference between the subjective and objective social worlds (Jenkins, 2002, p. 25). Subjectivity is attributed to the world of the individual who, as a social being, understands reality in accordance with his/her experiences and living context. The objective world, on the other hand, can be seen as a world that lies beyond the influence of a single individual through the social, economic, cultural, institutional, and power structures in which individual and collective practices are contextualised. Bourdieu's contribution to the social sciences has thus been one of studying, discussing, and empowering society regarding the frequently hidden tensions between structure and agency.

Bourdieu (1990) studied society through a double lens, using both individuals' perceptions of life trajectories and the structures on which their experiences were based as filters for understanding the 'logic of practice' of a complex social world: 'the relationship between external constraints which leave a very variable margin for choice, and dispositions which are the product of economic and social processes' (p. 50). Bourdieu's arsenal of conceptual tools also aimed to serve another dual purpose: encouraging methodological decisions and theoretical understandings. The combination provides a rich account of social phenomena being studied.

Bourdieu's social theory is also marked by his 'obsession with reflexivity' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 36), which is achieved through a shared effort to make visible the "'unthought of" categories, perceptions,

theories, and structures that underpin any pre-reflexive grasp of the social world' (Deer, 2008, p. 202). The guiding principle of reflexivity is to encourage critical understandings of social realities in both the researcher and the researched. Reflexivity, in this sense, is achieved through acts of reflection aimed at translating individuals' experiences into 'tangible' forms of knowledge that bring tacit understandings of practices and experiences to a 'visible' state. In other words, reflexivity aims to bring individuals' unconscious practical knowledge to a conscious level. The ultimate purpose of reflexivity is to lead to the emancipation of those who are able to objectify their or others' subjectivity through the understanding of the interplay between structures and agents.

It is not hard to understand that Bourdieu was a 'resister' (Richardson, 2005, p. 61) – a political activist devoted to the study of social structures. His goal was always to raise issues pertinent to the society of his time. Indignation towards the unfairness of the contemporary world remained a constant throughout Bourdieu's work, as he clearly stated in his last publication (2003). Thus, the debate about the dominating and dominated realities was Bourdieu's prime cause of study and advocacy. It comes as no surprise that the concept of habitus is of paramount importance in Bourdieu's work. This is so because it brings social agents to the fore through the dispositions and lived trajectories that characterise their practices.

The contribution of Bourdieu's sociology to research is threefold: (1) it provides a set of thinking tools which can support the methodological design; (2) it allows for a rich meaning-making approach in which both external systems and human experiences, objective and subjective worlds, are interdependently considered and analysed; (3) it has the potential to achieve the empowerment of both the researcher and the researched through a conceptual framework that aims to reconcile theory with practice through method.

Deconstructing habitus

In this section, we discuss the concept of habitus. Habitus provides a lens for understanding practice and knowledge within the social milieu in which they are contained and generated. Bourdieu's tools are, for this reason, more often used as interlinked factors and conditioners of agency and structure than they are applied as separate entities. Nonetheless, new discussions on habitus accept its separation from the other concepts that compose the Bourdieuan framework, provisionally or even permanently (Wacquant, 2014, p. 124).

In looking at habitus relationally, we need to understand the social structures (fields) that produce or change it. Habitus is socialised subjectivity that agents embody both individually and collectively, through the interrelationships they establish in the social spaces to which they belong. Habitus encapsulates social action through dispositions and can be broadly explained as the evolving process through which individuals act, think, perceive and approach the world and their role in it. Habitus thus denotes a way of being. Moreover, as assimilated past without a clear consciousness, habitus is an internal archive of personal experiences rooted in the distinct aspects of individuals' social journeys. Individuals' dispositions are a reflection of their lived trajectories and justify their approaches to practice (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 138).

Just like habitus, field entails an historical background that describes its existence, records its changes, and explains its evolution or lack of it. Fields of action are sites of struggle where social agents strive for different forms of capital that give them a position and a place in the social structure. As a socially embodied system of individual and collective dispositions made visible through social agents' practices, habitus is personal history that generates more history (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 54). The body as the locus of habitus incorporates and/or discards elements or the totality of a field's structure. This results in the harmonisation, compromise or disagreement between field and habitus.

Corresponding social and mental structures often turn into the assimilation of a 'natural' habitus, one that can hardly be distinguished by the field that produces it. Yet habitus is more than nature; it can also be nurtured. This dual approach to habitus can further be distinguished by the categorisation of two different types of habitus: primary and secondary. Agents' early experiences, which Bourdieu designates of primary or generic habitus, 'tend to ensure its own constancy and its defense against change' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 60), whereas secondary habitus – a dispositional scheme that is acquired at a later stage and in more specialised contexts, such as the school or the workplace – is more likely to encourage changes in individuals' practices. Hence, the interpretation of habitus extends beyond the explanation of reproduction of practices; it can also signify the change of dispositions and the strategies social agents use to modify or adapt to a given social field. Habitus can thus also be used as a tool illustrative of the production of new practices.

Habitus, as an evolving structure, provides unlimited scope for the production of new ideas, views, and approaches based on the socio-historical, political, economic, cultural and technological context in

which they are generated. Nonetheless, the situational environment in which practices are produced can constrain those same individual practices, as the context in which they are applied will have its own logic of practice and inherent regulations. As such, 'habitus may be accompanied by a strategic calculation tending to perform in a conscious mode the operation that the habitus performs quite differently' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53). It is indeed in the presence of 'alien' environments that individuals' habitus become easily identified or deliberately silenced. Habitus communicates the dialectics between structure and agency, between the object and the subject, through a dispositional theory of action and reflexivity. Field's social, multidimensional space provides the stage in which 'compatibilities and incompatibilities, proximities and distances' (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 725) are determined through the positions individuals occupy.

Through his tool kit, Bourdieu invites us to think relationally, not only in terms of the social phenomena being studied, but also with regards to the tools and methods researchers need to devise to construct, capture and conceptualise both the research object and the research subjects. Bourdieu's passionate work aims to surpass the dichotomy between practice and theory by combining both through methodologies able to identify representations of the dispositional systems that constitute habitus. His underlying argument is that research that does not acknowledge the full practical dynamic of the phenomenon it aims to study only generates partial and fragmented knowledge (Grenfell, 2010).

Applying habitus as a methodological tool means devising mechanisms through which social agents' dispositional schemes can be identified within the fields in which they originate or transform. Wacquant (2013) proposes three ways through which habitus can be disclosed. He suggests a synchronic and inductive method that allows one to 'trace out connections between patterns of preferences, expressions and social strategies within and across realms of activity so as to infer their shared matrix' (p. 3). He then goes on to propose a diachronic and deductive approach to disclosing habitus, as it allows the mapping of agents' social trajectories across time. Finally, he recommends a third approach to using habitus: as a method that consists of studying the field and the programmes the field uses to generate a specific habitus. In short, the operationalisation of habitus as a research tool implies taking into consideration its complexity as a container of practices imbued in the objective and subjective contexts of the phenomenon under study.

The organisation of this book

One of the key objectives in developing this collection was to illustrate the diversity of contexts within which the concept of habitus is applied. For the purpose of organisation, these contexts have been grouped under the following headings:

- Part II: Habitus, Transitions and Trajectories
- Part III: Habitus Transformed: The Effects of Mobility
- Part IV: Online Habitus

Each of these sections comprises a number of chapters that explore habitus and its applications from a range of theoretical and methodological angles, while also covering areas as distinct as digital scholarship, youth mobility, migration, youth crime, graduate employment trajectories and the effect of parental expectations on adolescent habitus. The research included in the book has been carefully selected so that as wide an understanding as possible of applied habitus could be provided to the reader, although it should be noted that the list of topics included should be seen as a reflection of a much wider field of intellectual endeavour.

Part II: Habitus, Transitions and Trajectories

Three chapters have been included. Garth Stahl's contribution (Chapter 2) focuses on how he has used Bourdieu's tool of habitus – in conjunction with capitals and field – to study the identity negotiations of white working-class boys in their own learner-identity, aspirations and sense of value. His research seeks to explore how current dominant neoliberal discourses, which prioritise a view of aspiration that is competitive, economic and status-based, shape the subjectivities of these young males. Stahl argues in the chapter that the habitus of these white working-class boys is always permeable, which allows them to engage with complex identity work in order to reconcile competing and contrasting conceptions of what it is to be both a neoliberal subject and an authentic white, working-class male in South London. Through the use of habitus, he explores how the aspiration rhetoric influenced the learner identity in three main areas: the boys' conception of 'loyalty to self'; their sense of being average/ordinary/'middling'; and their practices of 'othering' the non-normative behaviour within their locale. The boys' habitus works to protect what they perceive as an authentic white working-class male identity. Stahl uses his findings to critically reflect on the various issues involved in employing habitus as a theoretical tool,

and also how habitus has the capacity to enhance understanding of how boys do 'identity work' in constructing themselves as subjects of value within deficit discourses.

Katerina Bodovski's contribution (Chapter 3) summarises the main findings of the research she conducted on the effects of parental beliefs and practices on various educational outcomes of US students. Utilising a nationally representative sample of US students' Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K) data, she examined the relationships between parental practices and expectations and children's academic achievement, as well as children's self-concept, locus of control and educational expectations, which, she argues, constitute their emerging habitus.

Bodovski's chapter makes an important contribution to the theoretical sociological and educational literature, in particular by proposing new ways to operationalise a complex theoretical concept of habitus using students' educational expectations, internal locus of control, and general and area-specific self-concepts. Her study empirically examines how early parental practices and educational expectations (measured during kindergarten and first-grade years) affect students' emerging habitus and academic achievement when they reach adolescence (measured in 8th grade). Her findings problematise the ways whereby habitus is shaped; they open the question as to what extent habitus is affected by the structural settings children are raised within or by specific actions of the parents taken within these settings. Bodovski also includes reflections on the kinds of challenges she encountered conducting her research while attempting to bridge Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of habitus and capital with empirical work on educational outcomes.

In Chapter 4, Ciaran Burke demonstrates that the biographical narrative interview method is an appropriate and applicable form of data collection to observe the constant repetitions that comprises aspects of the habitus, this time in the context of graduate employment trajectories. In the chapter, Burke examines the friction between the theoretical habitus and empirical findings, reflecting on the need to demarcate the habitus 'on paper' and the empirical habitus. Focusing on a small cohort of working-class graduates who have become socially mobile, Burke demonstrates how their social mobility was generated via the habitus, illustrating how an *out-of-environment* experience can restructure the class habitus whilst still operating as the habitus, or in Bourdieuan language, still remaining the 'unchosen principle of choice'.

Alan France's contribution on theorising and researching the youth crime nexus (Chapter 5) is also included in Section 2, in this case