

Bourdieu's theory of capital, habitus and field



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How Useful are Bourdieu's Concept of Field, Habitus, and Capital for Understanding Contemporary Social Theory?

Introduction

Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) developed his theory of cultural capital, with Jean-Claude Passeron, as part of an attempt to explain differences in educational achievement according to social origin (Robbins, 2005: 22-24): to show 'that social exclusion is a continuous process' (Ibid. p 23). In his theory, the cultural and social forms of capital are based on, without being determined by, the amount of economic capital possessed and thus hide or mask the way in which social hierarchies are reproduced. The three forms of capital combine, and are embodied, to produce an individual's *habitus*, or set of predispositions, whilst the *field* refers to the arena in which a specific habitus is realised or deployed. For Bourdieu, then, the concepts of capital, field and habitus were ultimately embedded in relations of power (Burkett, 2004: 236) and were part of a complex theory that sought to explain the way that social inequality is reproduced. Many have debated the usefulness of Bourdieu's theory to contemporary research (see, for example, Fine in Burkett, 2004; Tooley and Darby in Nash, 1999), while others have debated the degree to which he drew on the founding fathers of sociology, with some concluding that his theory of practice is 'strongly Weberian' (Keyes, 2002: 233), or that his concepts draw on the work of Durkheim (Camic, 2000). Here I attempt to assess the degree to which he drew on Marx, Weber and Durkheim when constructing the key concepts of capital, field and habitus, and the usefulness or otherwise of them to contemporary research.

In the first section, I outline Bourdieu's concept of Capital, demonstrating its role within his overall theory before showing the key ways in which his usage differs from that of Marx. Next I examine the debate surrounding the use of the concept within contemporary political science, notably in the work of Robert Putnam (1995). In the second section, I examine Bourdieu's concept of Habitus, demonstrating its role within his overall theory of cultural capital, before showing the key ways in which his usage differs from that of Durkheim and Weber. Next, I examine the usefulness of the term by examining the debate surrounding its use in educational research in the work of Diane Reay (1995). In the final section, I outline Bourdieu's concept of the field, discussing its role within his overall theory before finally examining its usefulness to those undertaking feminist examinations of the way that power is experienced as differentiated, especially within the reproduction of patriarchy (McNay, 1999). In the conclusion, I attempt to assess the overall usefulness of Bourdieu's key concepts to the social sciences, arguing that he raided the concepts of the founding father but without having any ideological commitment to them; that his usage reflected his focus on them as tools of practical research. That, however, it is this practical focus that may have contributed to the difficulty experienced by those who now seek clarification as to their meaning.

The Forms of Capital

In this section I outline Bourdieu's concept of Capital, demonstrating its role within his overall theory before showing the key ways in which his usage differs from that of Marx. Finally, I examine the debate surrounding contemporary use of the concept within political science, notably in the work

of Robert Putnam (1995). For Bourdieu capital can be divided into different forms: social capital, cultural capital and economic capital. By social capital he refers to the network of 'useful relationships that can secure material or symbolic profits' (Bourdieu, 1986: 249): the amount of social capital that an individual can draw upon is thus the sum of the number of people in their network and the amount of capital so possessed. Bourdieu further divides cultural capital into three forms: 'embodied', 'objectified' and 'institutionalised': embodied capital is imbued during socialisation, and is ultimately tied to the social location of the individual (Nash, 1999: 185). Embodied capital represents 'external wealth converted into an integral part of the person' (Bourdieu, 1986: 244-5). Objectified capital refers to goods or artefacts – including paintings and sculptures – which '...are defined only in the relationship with cultural capital in its embodied form' (Bourdieu, 1986: 246): in other words, the goods themselves and the ability to consume them. Institutionalised capital refers to those academic qualifications which enable an individual to directly convert between cultural and economic capital: 'a certificate of cultural competence which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to culture' (Bourdieu, 1986: 248). Thus, the different forms of capital are based upon, but not determined by, economic capital. We can see that Bourdieu's use of 'capital' is very different from that employed by Marx. Whereas Karl Marx (1818-1883) had paid little attention to the cultural sphere, believing it to be little more than 'false consciousness', Bourdieu sought to use the language of Marx and economic theory (Robbins, 2005: 20) to develop a 'marxist' (Moi, 2000: 322) theory of culture. Like Marx, for Bourdieu capital has the capacity to reproduce 'in identical or expanded form' (Bourdieu, 1986: 241), becoming

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part of the structure of society that enables and constrains individual's lives (Bourdieu, 1986: 242). However, Bourdieu's use of the term may therefore be viewed as being closer to power (Bourdieu, 1986: 243) than as it was used by Marx.

In *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000) ^[1] Robert Putnam utilised the concept of social capital, transferring it from sociology into the realm of political science. Putnam argued that increasing individualism had led to the decline of community ties, political participation and therefore 'good governance' (Russell, 2005: 557). Putnam defined social capital as 'features of social organisation such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit' (Putnam, 1995: 67). However, Putnam's definition is very different from Bourdieu's; whereas for Bourdieu social capital was held by the individual (Walters, 2002: 387), for Putnam it is a collective capacity (Ibid. p. 379). Further, within Bourdieu's conception it would be difficult to see how there could be a *reduction* in social capital.

William Walters (2002) argues that Putnam's use of the concept differs from Bourdieu's in that whereas Bourdieu argued that social capital is transferable with economic capital but not reducible to it (Bourdieu, 1986: 243) Putnam's use is more liberal; he assumes 'a self-maximising individual for whom associative activity can, under certain circumstances, be an investment' (Walters, 2002: 379). Ben Fine argues, convincingly, that academia has been gripped by a 'social capital fetish' (in Burkett, 2004: 234): that the concept has been so stretched as to render it meaningless (Burkett, 2004: 238). However, the weakening of Bourdieu's concept of capital has occurred since <https://assignbuster.com/bourdieu-theory-of-capital-habitus-and-field/>

his death, and so reflects on contemporary theorists and not on the usefulness or otherwise of the concept itself.

Habit: Habitus

The forms of capital as outlined above combine to produce a persons *habitus*, or set of predispositions: in this section I first provide a brief summary of the use of habit/ habitus in sociological thought, before next outlining Bourdieu's use of the term. I examine the concepts role within his schema and demonstrate how his conception draws, but differs from, the work of Durkheim and Weber. Finally, I examine the debate surrounding the use of the concept in educational research, notably by Diane Reay (1995, in Nash, 1999). Charles Camic (200) describes how the term habit was extensively used by the Ancient Greeks, and medieval scholars and theologians. During the 18th century it continued to be used by Enlightenment thinkers as diverse as Helvétius, Acquinas, Rousseau and Kant (Camic, 2000: 329; Nash, 1999: 180-182) to describe a range of behaviour from those 'virtually automatic' actions to 'more involved patterns of conduct' (Camic, 2000: 327). Within the work of Durkheim the term assumed a central importance, concerned as he was with the development of the collective conscience, or secular moral code (Camic, 2000: 334). For Durkheim human action could be divided into two poles, with 'reflection on the one side, and that of habit on the other side, with the latter pole being the stronger' (Durkheim in Camic, 2000: 333). For Durkheim primary education was therefore benign, for here the child can be imbued with 'the habitual basis of social morality' (Camic, 2000: 33). Yet despite this assertion of the central role of habit in the social

world, Durkheim assigned the study of it to psychology, and not sociology (Camic, 2000: 337).

However, for Bourdieu social inequality, or differential access to the forms of capital, becomes part of the very bodies and predispositions of the individual via the *habitus* (McNay, 1999: 99). Marx argued that ‘ men make their own history, but [...] they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past’ (Marx, 1852, quoted in Coates, 1990: 265): for Bourdieu, the individual is constrained by the amount and quality of cultural, economic and social capital that they possess: it is ‘ discrimination embodied as dispositions’ (Nash, 1999: 177), it is thus a *sociological* concern. Further, whereas Durkheim’s *conscience collective* sought to explain the way in which meaning is given to emotional experiences (Shilling, 1997: 204) and so focuses on the collective, for Bourdieu the habitus is a possession of the individual (Nash, 1999: 182).

For Weber, ‘ custom’ designated that range of behaviour that is the ‘ unreflective, set disposition to engage in actions that have been long practiced’ (Camic, 2000: 337): being both conformity with and the generator of social norms (Camic, 2000: 338). This is similar to Bourdieu’s ‘ sociology of practice’: following Weber, Bourdieu believes that the purpose of the social sciences is to explain action, yet where Weber was more interested in the ‘ larger social and cultural conditions under which general societal patterns of habitual action wax and wane’ (Camic, 2000: 341), Bourdieu remains tied to the individual, actual, practical affects of power and history (Bourdieu in Nash, 1999: 179). For Weber, habit falls at the border of meaningful action, <https://assignbuster.com/bourdieu-theory-of-capital-habitus-and-field/>

and therefore outside of sociology (Camic, 2000: 345), for Bourdieu it is precisely the doxic nature of habit that renders it socially important.

Diane Reay (1995) used habitus as a *method* when conducting fieldwork in the classroom (in Nash, 1999). For Weber, an ideal type is ' a construct developed to make sense out of a chaos of facts' (Keyes, 2002: 240).

Likewise, for Bourdieu habitus helps us to make sense of ' that part of practices which remains obscure in the eyes of their own producers' (Bourdieu in Keyes, 2002: 240): it is a conceptual tool, something to ' think with' (Nash, 1999: 185). Roy Nash (1999) charts the difficulties that arise, when such a conceptual tool is utilised in practical research, but concludes that it is ' worthwhile, just because to do so forces one to think' (Nash, 1999: 185): the habitus ' offers explanations' (Nash, 1999: 185), by examining whether the habitus can explain social differences in education we have gained a deeper understanding of these inequalities. The concept of habit had previously been a ' staple' of western social thought, from medieval times to the thought of Weber and Durkheim, but fell outside of sociology and into psychology due to the scramble to assert disciplinary boundaries (Camic, 2000: 355); Bourdieu sought to revive the concept as part of his search for concepts which would aid our understanding of the limits to individual action: it is ' a conceptual tool for comprehending that the capacity to project forwards which people really possess is understandable as a function of their prior social condition rather than in terms of abstract mathematical models' (Robbins, 2005: 26). In other words, habitus allows Bourdieu to mediate between agency and structure without relying on the

atomised, rational individual of liberalism, instead situating the actor within extant power relations.

The Field

In the final section I outline Bourdieu's concept of the field, discussing its role within his overall theory before finally examining its usefulness to those undertaking feminist examinations of the reproduction of patriarchy (McNay, 1999). The 'field' refers to the arena, or social context, in which a specific habitus may be realised; knowledge regarding the use of particular machinery may be of little use in the world of show jumping, but of uppermost importance to those involved in car manufacture. Likewise, maintaining a network of engineers would be of little use to those outside this specific field: society in total constitutes a field, and is 'structured according to relations of domination' (Peillon, 1998: 215), but also society is comprised by a range of distinct fields:

Fields will vary according to how much autonomy they acquire from the entirety of the social field. An autonomous field is characterised by a high level of specificity: it possesses its own history; a particular configuration of agents operate within it and struggle for a distinctive stake; it induces its own habitus and upholds a distinctive set of beliefs. Such an autonomous field is highly differentiated and marked by sharp boundaries, beyond which the field ceases to have any impact on practice (Peillon, 1998: 215).

Bourdieu recognised that academia is such a field and therefore is embedded in and reflects social relations. For Bourdieu, then, the field refers to the different arenas or social spaces in which capital is deployed or the

habitus acts: ' the embodied potentialities of the habitus are only ever realized in the context of a specific field' (McNay, 1999: 109), further, each field is distinct and therefore operates according to its own logic (McNay, 1999: 114): knowledge of sociological theory would be of little use to our aforementioned show jumper. As it is deployed, therefore, habitus is both determined and generative as it is able to constitute the field from which it emerges (McNay, 1999: 100); it is the ' feel for the game' that also reproduces the game (Bourdieu, 1990: 52) as each individual is positioned within the field by their possession of specific types of capital and their strategies so contribute to its reproduction.

When comparing Bourdieu's conceptualisation of the field with that of Foucault's work on the body, Lois McNay (1999) finds that Bourdieu's is the more developed as he is better able to theorize the differentiated nature of the constraints which act to limit the individuals ability to create their own identity (McNay, 1999: 95). For McNay, Bourdieu's concept of the field is useful within feminist theory when considering the differences *within* women's experiences of gender, as well as those differences *between* men and women (McNay, 1999: 114): ' as a relational concept the field yields an understanding of society as a *differentiated* and open structure and provides a framework in which to conceptualise the uneven and non-systematic ways in which subordination and autonomy are realized' (McNay, 1999: 115, my emphasis). For example, in relation to the production of knowledge this might explain the early marginalization of much feminist research and the way it was the thought of a particular group of women - white, heterosexual, middle class women - that came to dominate second wave feminism, as

opposed to the feminisms of other groups: in short, Bourdieu's concept of the field enables us to consider the way that power is not a monolithic concept but is experienced differentially.

Conclusion

In conclusion, when assessing the overall usefulness of Bourdieu's key concepts to contemporary research and theory it is important not to forget the intention of Bourdieu himself: Bourdieu intended capital, habitus and the field to be tools used to aid such empirical research (Peillon, 1998: 241) and not as constituent parts of a 'grand theory': he had no interest in 'speculative philosophy' (Robbins, 2005: 15). Bourdieu's theory has been criticized as being essentialist and deterministic, however others have embraced its potential to explain the way in which such social inequality is reproduced (such as Reay, 1995 in Nash, 1999). Derek Robbins argues that Bourdieu had 'no sympathy for the mystery of Durkheim's *conscience collective*' but was enough a product of the 'Durkheimian legacy' to wish to encourage a future society based on the positive unity of equality (Robbins, 2005: 19). For Robbins then, Bourdieu:

regarded the discourses of the sciences as contrived language games which are alienated from natural culture. This did not cause him to be reductive or sceptical but it did cause him to deploy these discourses, varying them imaginatively, so as to isolate essences which are contingently changeable socially, geographically and historically (Robbins, 2005: 20).

In other words, the language of the sciences were the tools that Bourdieu used in his practical attempt to construct a fairer world. However, it is this

practical focus of his concepts that may have contributed to the difficulty experienced by those who now seek clarification as to their meaning, as he had varied their meaning to aid understanding of the particular instance under scrutiny. Having drawn on the work of the founding fathers of sociology – Marx, Durkheim, Weber – he felt no ideological commitment to these concepts, but instead felt free to move between discourses to better understand (Robbins, 2005: 20). Thus the concept of habit and/ or habitus that had been a ‘ staple’ concept in western social thought, (Camic, 2000: 355) which Bourdieu sought to revive as part of his search for concepts which would aid our understanding of the limits to individual action. Keyes argues that Bourdieu’s use of habitus is as a Weberian ‘ ideal type’ (2002: 239), I argue that his use of capital and the field are as similar ‘ ideal types’. His concept of capital may have been weakened, as Ben Fine argues, by academia’s subsequent stretching (Burkett, 2004: 238), however this weakening occurred after his death, and so should not reflect negatively on the usefulness of the concept. Indeed, it is this flexibility that renders it an appropriate tool. Finally, his notion of the field is useful when considering the differentiated affects of power: Bourdieu remains good to ‘ think with’ (Nash, 1999: 185).

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Footnotes

[1] New York, N. Y.: Simon & Schuster.