

## Habitus and Reflexivity: Restructuring Bourdieu's Theory of Practice

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### Abstract

Contrary to Bourdieu's thesis, it is not only when a subject's habitus does not fit a field's positions that s/he becomes more reflexive. Reflexivity is also enhanced by intra-habitus tensions, by more general incongruences between dispositions, positions, and interactive/figurational structures, as well as by situations unrelated to them. Because of his ambitious but unsuccessful attempt to transcend the objectivist-subjectivist divide in the social sciences, Bourdieu underemphasizes the interactive dimension of social games, and this creates serious problems for his conceptualization of the linkages between habitus, reflexivity, and practices. The way to make Bourdieu's theory of practice less functionalist and/or deterministic is to restructure it so that it seriously takes into account not only the dispositional and positional but also the interactive dimension of social games. It then becomes obvious that reflexive accounting, conscious strategizing, and rational calculation are not exceptional but routine, constitutive elements of human action.

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**Keywords:** *Reflexivity, Dispositions, Positions, Figurations, Practices*

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### Introduction

**1.1** A critical assessment of the relationship between the notions of habitus and of reflexivity must start with the habitus–reflexivity connection being placed within Bourdieu's overall "theory-of–practice" scheme. For the French sociologist the habitus, as a set of dispositions (i.e. of generative schemata of cognition, perception, evaluation etc.), is the major link between social structures on the one hand and practices on the other. Social structures, via various socialization processes, are internalized and become dispositions, and dispositions lead to practices which, in turn, reproduce social structures. It is in this way, according to Bourdieu, that the habitus transcends the objectivist-subjectivist divide in the social sciences: it is both structured and structuring, an objective product of social structures as well as the producer of practices reproducing social structures (Bourdieu 1977, 1990). To put it schematically, we have:

Social Structures (S) → Dispositions (D) → Practices (P).<sup>[1]</sup>

**1.2** The SDP scheme has often been criticized as being mechanistic and deterministic or as differing very little from Parsons' oversystemic, functionalist analysis of social action (Jenkins 1991, Mouzelis 1995: 100-26). Bourdieu has defended his scheme by arguing that the habitus does not automatically lead to practices and that on the contrary, it is flexible, "polysemic and polythetic". Rather than strictly determining practices, it operates as a limiting framework within which a great number of practices can be produced.

"The habitus, like every 'art of inventing' is what makes it possible to produce an infinite number of practices that are relatively unpredictable, even if they are limited in their diversity" (Bourdieu 1990: 63).

It is precisely this inventive flexibility that allows the habitus carrier, when s/he enters a specific field, to cope with the varied requirements that "positions" entail.

**1.3** According to Bourdieu, this type of polythetic adaptability operates in a taken-for-granted, non-reflexive manner, however. In normal circumstances the habitus functions in a way that entails neither introspection nor calculation; in normal circumstances an actor's dispositions and the field's positions lead to practices

without the activation of rationally-based strategies. It is only when "crises" occur, i.e. when there is a lack of fit between dispositions and positions, that reflexivity and rational strategizing enter the scene. When positions change and strategies lag behind, the "Don Quixote effect" occurs. This obliges the habitus carrier to abandon her/his taken-for-granted orientations and to adopt more reflexive, calculating modes of operation (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 131).

## 1. Dispositions, Positions, Interactions

**2.1** The first objection to Bourdieu's thesis about the habitus-reflexivity relationship is that, in order to understand what role reflexivity assumes in a given field, one has to consider not only the dispositional and positional but also the interactive dimension of the social games played within it. If a field's game entails the varied internalized dispositional structures of the players involved, it also entails not only relations between positions (i.e. in conventional sociology, the *role/institutional structure* of the game) but also the actual relations between actors (in Elias' terminology, *figurational structures*).<sup>[2]</sup>

**2.2** To be more concrete, in a football game for instance each situated player, as the carrier of dispositions (acquired via various socializations) has to pay attention not only to the game's rules that apply to her/his position and the position of the other players, but also to the actual interactive relations between players as these unfold syntagmatically in time and space. In other words, a specific habitus carrier has to take in account both the game's institutional structure (i.e. the relationships between roles/positions), and figurational structures (i.e. the relationships between actual players). Figurational structures are not reducible to institutional structures, since there is often a discrepancy between what is demanded by a role's normative requirements and what actually happens in the context of the game's concrete interactive processes. Therefore, a field and the game related to it entails three rather than two social structures: (i) internalized dispositional structures (the habitus) based on what Bourdieu calls a practical logic, (ii) institutional structures (the system of positions) operating on the basis of a normative logic, and (iii) figurational structures (systems of patterned relationships between real actors) operating on the basis of an interactive and strategizing logic.<sup>[3]</sup>

## 2. Reflexivity

**2.3** If the above is accepted, rational and/or reflexive calculation does not appear, as Bourdieu argues, only when there is a lack of fit between dispositions and positions. It appears also

- when there are incongruencies between dispositional, positional and figurational structures;
- when there are intra-habitus (intra-dispositional) contradictions;
- when persons are reflexive, irrespective of how congruent or incongruent dispositions are *vis-à-vis* positions and/or figurations.

### Reflexivity and contradictions between dispositions, positions, figurations

**2.4** Consideration of the interactive-figurational dimension of social games makes it obvious that an actor's dispositions might be in conflict not only with a field's system of positions but also with its figurational structures, with the way in which actual players rather than positions relate to each other. Let us take as an example M. Crozier's classical study of a formal organization where a group of actors, taking advantage of an area of "organizational uncertainty", manage to monopolize key resources and to impose their will on their hierarchical superiors (Crozier, 1963: 200ff). In this case we have an incongruence between a *de jure* situation (constituted by the normative requirements entailed in the hierarchical system of positions) and a *de facto* situation consisting of emergent relationships between actual interacting subjects struggling for control over strategic resources. This means that there is a lack of fit between institutional and figurational structures. Although Crozier does not deal with the issue of reflexivity, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the actors involved (particularly those whose hierarchically superior positions gave them rights of command there were unable to exercise) became more aware both of the field's institutional and figurational structures, as well as of the lack of fit between dispositions, positions, and figurations.

### Reflexivity and intra-habitus contradictions

**2.5** Reflexivity may focus less on interactive and more on intra-active processes. In other words, reflexivity may be enhanced not only when there are contradictions between dispositions, positions and figurations, but also when the subject has to handle intra-habitus conflicts. For instance, Trevor Butt and Darren Langdridge (2003) studied the diaries of the well-known comedian Kenneth Williams (1928-1988) and found a deep contradiction between his homosexual dispositions on the one hand, and his deeply conservative, anti-libertarian mentality on the other; the latter predisposed him to consider anything related to homosexuality as "filth". These two fundamental aspects of K. Williams' habitus — both products of differing and varied socialization processes — were obviously linked to his overdeveloped reflexivity which a reading of his diaries makes very obvious.

### Reflexivity unrelated to contradictions

**2.6** Bourdieu's emphasis on the predominantly pre-reflexive nature of the habitus, and his underemphasis of the interactive dimension of social games has led him to overlook types of reflexivity that are not linked to "crisis" situations — i.e. types of reflexivity that are features of everyday situations. The constant internal accounting actors engage with in routine social interactions (what ethnomethodologists call "reflexive accounting") goes on regardless of whether or not the habitus is congruent with a field's positions. In fact, as Garfinkel (1984) has convincingly shown, reflexive accounting is a constitutive

feature of all social games.

**2.7** When Bourdieu argues that the habitus is highly flexible and inventive, he does not take seriously into consideration that this inventiveness, which is required by the game's constantly unfolding interactive situation, entails reflexivity. In other words, players cannot perform at all if they do not combine the take-for-granted practical logic of their dispositions with the reflexive-calculative logic resulting from their involvement in interactive situations.

**2.8** Finally, in addition to reflexive accounting, one must also bear in mind that reflexivity can be related to an actor's special disposition, i.e. to a reflexive disposition acquired not via crisis situations, but via a socialization focusing on the importance of "the inner life" or the necessity to "create one's own goals". For instance, growing up in a religious community which stresses meditation and inner contemplation can result in members of this community acquiring a type of reflexive habitus that is unrelated to contradictions between dispositions and positions.

**2.9** Moreover, reflexivity can take historically-specific forms. Giddens and Beck's reflexive modernization, for instance, refers to a historically-specific, post-traditional situation where actors find themselves obliged to reflexively create their own lifestyles, "their own biography". Given that in late modernity neither tradition nor collective ideologies can provide a set of goals for organizing everyday existence, individuals are "forced to choose" — forced, that is to say, to become reflexive on matters ranging from the clothes they wear and the food they eat to the type of family they want to create. In all such cases, major or minor, broad or narrow goals are constantly constructed and reconstructed by reflexive subjects trying to fill the void left by the demise of traditional codes and early-modern ideologies (Beck, Giddens, Lash 1994).

**2.10** Finally, in late modernity reflexivity may take less activist and more "apophatic"<sup>[4]</sup> forms: the absence of traditionally or ideologically formulated goals may lead the reflexivity-orientated subject to a type of inner exploration which, instead of consciously setting targets and rationally choosing the means to achieve them, aims at removing internal obstacles that are preventing the spontaneous emergence of personal goals. The psychoanalytic tradition is based on such types of reflexivity. The aim of analysis is not to impose on or offer the analysand pre-set goals, but rather to "negatively" eliminate or weaken various defensive mechanisms that are obstructing the emergence of a person's "genuine" goals. The same type of apophatic reflexivity is found in religious and spiritual traditions where the approach to the divine is achieved not by rationalistic, cognitive means but by the so-called *via negativa*. The believer turns inward in order to eliminate thoughts and/or practices that prevent him/her from becoming an "open vessel" ready to receive the divine light (Mouzelis, 1999: 87-90).

### 3. Bourdieu's Conception of the Subject

**3.1** In the light of what has been said above, one can argue that Bourdieu's actor is half-way between Parsons' "oversocialized" and Levi-Strauss' "decentered" subject. For Bourdieu, the subject relates to the former in the sense that the habitus carrier, in normal non-crisis conditions, portrays a lack of voluntarism and lack of reflexive handling of positions similar to Parsons' "cultural-dope" actor *vis-à-vis* the role s/he plays. It relates to Levi-Strauss' decentered subject in that Bourdieu's actor has only practical rather than theoretical knowledge of his/her dispositions. This means that at least some of the more unconscious dispositions come very close to Levi-Strauss' "hidden codes", which refer to the rules below the conscious surface that people follow without being aware of them.

**3.2** All three authors, in different ways of course, underemphasize the agentic, voluntaristic, strategizing qualities of actors. For Levi-Strauss, anti-voluntarism relates to the structuralist attempt to abolish the subject-object distinction by decentering the subject, by going beyond or behind surface rules and norms. For Parsons, the subject-object distinction is maintained, but interaction is underemphasised<sup>[5]</sup> and players are portrayed as passive products of objective social structures (Mouzelis 1995: 129ff). In Bourdieu's case finally, the subjective-objective divide is not abolished but transcended via a "structurationist" strategy, which regards the habitus as pertaining to both the objective (the habitus as product of structures) and the subjective (the habitus as "structuring" structures).<sup>[6]</sup>

**3.3** It may, of course, be argued that it is unfair to criticize Bourdieu's overall theoretical scheme for lack of voluntarism. It could be objected that, unlike Parsons, Bourdieu constantly refers to actors' struggles, to their strategies aiming at the acquisition of a field's various types of capital (economic, political, symbolic etc.).<sup>[7]</sup> But neither the struggles nor the strategies in Bourdieu's theory of practice entail rational calculation and/or reflexive handling of the norms and actions of the players. Strategies for Bourdieu do not as a rule involve rational calculation and reflexive accounting. They are generated and unfold quasi-automatically as actors, in taken-for-granted fashion, mobilize their dispositional potential within a field's interrelated positions. Therefore, in "normal" conditions the rational, calculating, voluntaristic elements of action are absent or peripheral. For the French sociologist it is only in exceptional circumstances that, similar to reflexivity, rational strategizing comes to the fore.

**3.4** "The most profitable strategies are usually those produced, *without any calculation*, and in the illusion of the most absolute 'sincerity', by a habitus objectively fitted to the objective structures. These strategies *without strategic calculation* produce an important secondary advantage for those who can scarcely be called their authors: the social approval occurring to apparent disinterestedness" (Bourdieu 1995: 292, italics mine).<sup>[8]</sup> This highly idiosyncratic, non-voluntaristic conceptualization by Bourdieu of the notions of strategy and struggles creates some serious problems. First of all, his position does not sufficiently acknowledge that the degree of rational calculation and of reflexivity involved in social games is an empirical question. Quite obviously certain games (e.g. a game of chess, inter-firm competition for the acquisition of a larger market share, inter-state geopolitical struggles, etc.) require high levels of rational

calculation. Other social games do not (e.g. religious ceremonies within which interactions have a strictly ritualistic character).

**3.5** It should by now have become obvious that the reason Bourdieu has conceptualized strategies in a way that does not entail rational calculation and reflexivity has less to do with the rarity of rational strategizing than with his attempt to "transcend" the objectivist-subjectivist divide. Such transcendence implies subject-object conflation, a lack of distance between subjective dispositions and objective positions/figurations; it implies, in other words practices being performed in a taken-for-granted, quasi-automatic, non-reflexive manner. It is only when the objective-subjective distinction is maintained that it is possible to deal in theoretically congruent manner with cases where situated actors distance themselves from social structures relatively external<sup>[9]</sup> to them in order to assess, more or less rationally, the degree of constraint and enablement these structures offer, the pros and cons, the chances of success or failure of different strategies, etc.

**3.6** Of course Bourdieu cannot completely avoid the above type of voluntaristic consideration in his empirical work. As already mentioned, when he refers to the "Don Quixote" syndrome, i.e. to situations where a subject's dispositions clash with a field's positions, he does allow for the emergence of reflexivity. But he does so not because but *despite* his conceptual framework. The latter is constructed around the idea that there is no distance between the subject as habitus carrier and social structures. Hence reflexivity and rational strategizing (which entail distance) are considered as exceptional states of affairs. In this way the subject-object distinction is reluctantly brought back into the picture by the back door, so to speak: it does operate, but only in exceptional cases.

#### 4. Restructuring the SDP Scheme

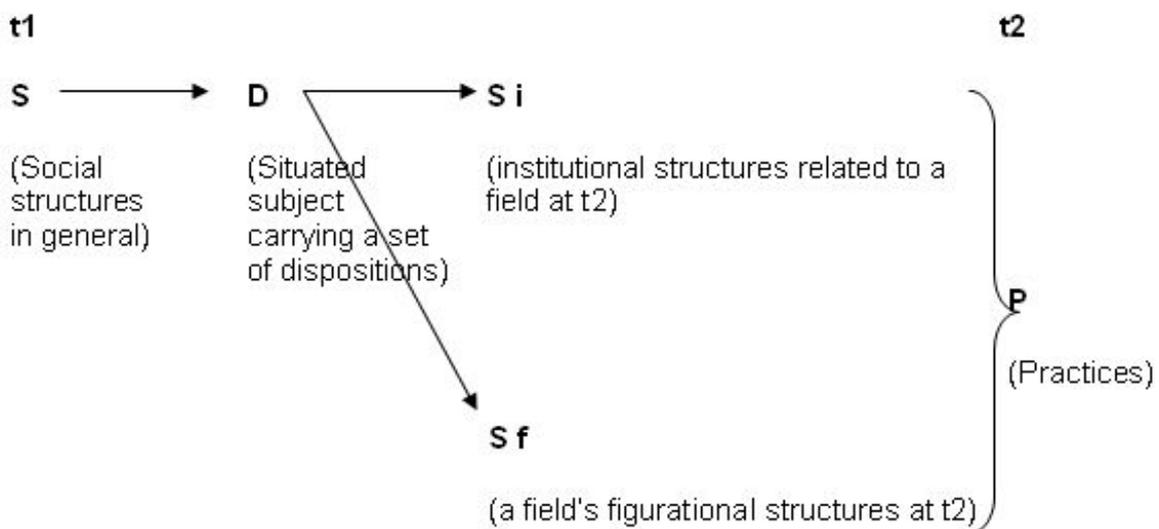
**4.1** To summarize the above: Bourdieu's notion of the habitus and his theory of practice generally—given that it is based on the idea of transcending the objectivist-subjectivist divide — underemphasizes the rational, calculative, and reflexive aspects of human action. As a result, when he deals with specific fields and the social games related to them, he stresses more their dispositional and positional, and less their interactive dimensions; more a subject's internalized dispositions and a field's positional-institutional structures, and less its figurational ones; more the practical logic of dispositions and the normative logic of positions and roles, and less the rational and reflexive logic of interactive situations.

**4.2** The habitus concept cannot account effectively for social practices unless its connections are shown with not only positional and institutional but also with interactive and figurational structures. The latter, because they entail notions of reflexive accounting, of calculation and of rational strategizing, are indispensable for an understanding of how practices come into being and how social structures are reproduced and transformed.

**4.3** If the above is given due consideration it will be seen that the only way to overcome the functionalism and/or determinism which, as many critics have pointed out, characterizes Bourdieu's theory of practice, is restructuring the structure-disposition-practice (SDP) scheme; so as to ensure that it takes seriously into account the reflexive, rational and voluntaristic aspects of social action and the interactive/figurational aspects of social games that they entail. To be more specific, there are two major modifications that are necessary for an effective restructuring of the SDP scheme:

- There must be a clear distinction between an initial phase (t1) when social structures are internalized by the subject via socialization, and a subsequent phase (t2) when the subject as habitus carrier is involved in a specific field and its games.
- Equally, there must be a clear distinction between a field's positional/institutional structures (as a set of positions and roles) and figurational structures (as a set of patterned relations between actual players).

**4.4** If (a) and (b) are followed, then the S→D→P scheme becomes more complex:



## Explanations:

**4.5** At an initial phase (t1) a subject, via varied socializations, internalizes social structures (S) and acquires a set of dispositions (D). At (t2) the subject or player is situated in a specific field. S/he is confronted by and has to take into consideration the field's interrelated positions, i.e. its institutional structure (S i) . S/he also has to take into account the field's unfolding figurational structure (S f). Practices at t2 are the result of an articulation of dispositions (D), positions (S i), and figurations (S f).

**4.6** To put this differently: players involved in a field's social game, singly or collectively, produce practices or game outcomes by mobilizing their dispositions in the light of constraints / enablements generated by a field's institutional *and* figurational structures. As far as reflexivity is concerned, this does not appear only when there are incongruencies between dispositions and positions, or even between dispositions, positions and figurations. As "reflexive accounting", it is a constitutive figure of all interactive structures. Moreover, there can be pronounced reflexivity not only in situations of incongruency but also when social circumstances in general and/or a type of socialization in particular favour the development of what has been called a "reflexive habitus" (Sweetman, 2003).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a succinct formulation of the SDP scheme and its application in the field of education see Nash (2003).

<sup>2</sup>For a critical discussion of Elias' figurational sociology and the differences between institutional and figurational structures see Mouzelis (1993).

<sup>3</sup>For a concrete example of these three basic dimensions of a social game see Mouzelis (1995 : 101-14).

<sup>4</sup>For the distinction between apophatic (negative) and kataphatic (positive) forms of reflexivity see Mouzelis (1999).

<sup>5</sup>For the underemphasis of the interactive dimension in Parsons' middle and late period see Turner (1990).

<sup>6</sup>For a comparison of the ways in which Bourdieu's and Giddens' structurationism try to transcend the objective-subjective divide see Mouzelis (2000).

<sup>7</sup>For a defense of Bourdieu's theory of practice along such lines see McNay (1999).

<sup>8</sup>It is fair to note that the absence of conscious calculation in Bourdieu's concept of strategy does not mean that his theory of practice leads to determinism. "The idea of strategy, like the orientation of practice, is not conscious or calculated nor is it mechanically determined. It is the intuitive product of 'knowing' the rules of the game" (R. Hawker 1990: 17). But "knowing the rules of the game" is not sufficient for playing it successfully. If a game's interactive dimension is seriously taken into account, it will be seen that what Bourdieu calls "inventiveness" necessarily entails not only an intuitive knowledge of game rules, but also the reflexive, rational handling of such rules. For the strong linkages between interaction and "inventiveness"/creativity see Joas (1996).

<sup>9</sup>Relatively "external" in the sense that a field's institutional and figurational structures may exist before a specific actor enters a particular field and may continue after the actor's temporary or permanent exit.

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