

Habitus, Capitals and Field: a Bourdieusian framework for understanding transitions into higher education. (0135)

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The emergence of post-industrialisation and, with it, a knowledge economy, articulated by Daniel Bell (1973), introduced a supposed sea change in social stratification. Gone were positions based on birthright, and, instead, a social system was formed based on knowledge with the new elites earning their positions through hard work and diligence – creating an avenue for all, if hungry enough, to rise to these lofty heights. Through the meritocratic narratives of human capital theory, education became a cornerstone in the pursuit for social equality, and increased access to education became a simple yet elegant policy to foster social mobility. As Tight (2012) has discussed, while “widening participation” has not always been in the public/policy vocabulary, it is a policy with its roots in post-war Britain, beginning with the 1944 Education Act and the Robbins Report (1963). This paper will encourage supporters/advocates of widening participation to pause and consider the structural and individual barriers still present within the UK higher education system affecting opportunity, decision-making and choice. The need for this pause and the reminder of the continuing presence and effect of the mechanisms of social reproduction will be articulated through a critical sociological lens – to be specific, through Bourdieusian social theory.

This paper will provide an overview of Bourdieu’s theoretical project, discussing the structural constructivist origins of his position and the attempt to provide a pragmatic and tangible bridge between individual actions/agency and social/cultural structures. The paper will examine Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, capital and field, unpacking their formation and influence toward individual attitudes and action and how they work together to provide the blueprints of Bourdieu’s theory of practice, often expressed as [(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice (1984: 101). This section of the paper will be supported by reflecting on the critical reception Bourdieu has received from some corners within sociology – particularly the work of Richard Jenkins and Margaret Archer. Through charges including determinism, fatalism and lack of international application the paper will discuss the limitations and merits of applying Bourdieu’s theoretical model. This paper will argue quite strongly for the continuing relevance of Bourdieu though the application of his theoretical apparatus and its ability to act as a counter-position to late modern narratives – in particular, those from Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens.

In an effort to place some meat on what are, at times, some fairly abstract bones, this paper will turn to discuss Bourdieu’s arguments concerning the educational system. Through Bourdieu’s position as a leading sociologist of education, there is a significant body of secondary literature. This paper will, thus, provide an analysis of primary literature from various periods of Bourdieu’s career. It will focus on three themes within Bourdieu’s work on education. The first theme is the role or task of the sociology of education; here, Bourdieu is quite clear that, in the context of education being seen as a site of social justice and social mobility, it is the responsibility of social science to critically analyse the extent to which this is accurate and the barriers that individuals and groups may face. The second theme is the directive influence of *a priori* barriers on attitudes toward higher education and trajectories. Stemming from the

influence of habitus and capitals, Bourdieu illustrates the often classed self-regulation of students in relation to higher education; importantly, for issues of access to higher education, these patterns of self-regulation and self-exemption are experienced on the individual level but are placed and reinforced by structural mechanisms. The final theme to be explored will be the role of the education system in social reproduction. For Bourdieu, the physical manifestation of the educational system – the school buildings – and the interactions within its walls, including the type of language teachers use and the focus of the curriculum (both academic and extracurricular), transmits and supports dominant practices and attitudes. Successful navigation of the educational system requires cultural competency and an understanding of unwritten rules, usually reserved for the dominant group. Bourdieu suggests that middle class/dominant students demonstrate their compatibility with the elite cultural values of the educational system through signifiers such as ‘style, taste and wit’ (1974: 39), which are seen as natural and expected. The tacit fit and support between the educational system and the dominant group allows these students to flourish within its walls to the detriment of working class/dominated students.

In order to strengthen the Bourdieusian position and, in particular, its contemporary relevance to the issues of access to higher education, the paper will draw on a number of empirical studies to illustrate these issues in practice. In an effort to provide a brief excavation of these research projects, the paper will specifically focus on findings from the Futuretrack research project (Purcell, *et al.*, 2008) and recent work from Jones (2013). Findings from these research projects which will be unpacked and analysed include the classed attitudes of students in relation to reading for a degree, the role of the family in making decisions, the position of students’ secondary level educational institutions within the educational hierarchy and the role of cultural competencies – articulated in Bourdieusian terms as cultural and social capital – during the application process. The paper will conclude with a brief discussion of current widening participation and social mobility/justice policy within the UK. Taking the position that the dominant theme running through most of this policy is influenced by late modernity, understanding social space to be increasingly decentred and characterized by choice, the paper will offer some realistic recommendations for effective future policy.

## References

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