

Bringing Bourdieu's master concepts into organizational analysis

David L. Swartz

Published online: 4 January 2008
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Abstract This article argues that while elements of Pierre Bourdieu's sociology are increasingly employed in American sociology, it is rare to find all three of Bourdieu's master concepts—habitus, capital, and field—incorporated into a single study. Moreover, these concepts are seldom deployed within a relational perspective that was fundamental to Bourdieu's thinking. The article "Bourdieu and Organizational Analysis" by Mustafa Emirbayer and Victoria Johnson is a welcomed exception, for it draws on all three of Bourdieu's pillar concepts to propose a relational approach to the study of organizations. It both reframes existing thinking about organizations, particularly from the neo-institutional and resource dependence schools, and indicates new directions for research in organizations to move. This paper evaluates their contribution calling attention to its many strengths and suggesting a few points that need future clarification and elaboration.

I am frequently asked to review journal manuscripts that draw on some aspect of Pierre Bourdieu's sociology, particularly his concepts of cultural capital and field. Very often a paper formulates just one of his concepts and attempts to apply it to some empirical object. Not infrequently the outcome of the empirical test is used to judge the relevance of Bourdieu's thinking for a particular empirical domain. Only rarely do I come across an article that attempts to draw on the ensemble of Bourdieu's thinking. The article "Bourdieu and Organizational Analysis" by Mustafa Emirbayer and Victoria Johnson is a welcomed exception for they argue that one needs to draw on all three of Bourdieu's master concepts—habitus, capital, and field—for the study of organizations. Their paper is the best presentation of Bourdieu's complex theoretical framework that I have seen for application to the study of organizations. It both reframes existing thinking about organizations, particularly from the neo-institutional and resource dependence schools, and indicates new directions for research in organizations to move.

D. L. Swartz (✉)
Sociology Department, Boston University, 96-100 Cummington St., Boston, MA 02215, USA
e-mail: dswartz@bu.edu

Not only do the authors draw from all three of Bourdieu's pillar concepts—habitus, capital, and field—rather than focusing on just one,¹ they correctly locate the concepts within Bourdieu's general meta-theoretical perspective of relational analysis. Emirbayer (1997) has argued in earlier work for the need for a relational perspective in sociology and points to Bourdieu as an exemplary voice in this view.² In an earlier article, I (Swartz 2005a) identify four general orienting principles that guide Bourdieu's sociological work: (1) integrating subjective and objective forms of knowledge, (2) constructing sociological research objects, (3) thinking relationally, and (4) using reflexivity. The authors include the first three in their discussion and stress relationality. They do not, however, highlight reflexivity that nonetheless is a central and enduring methodological concern throughout Bourdieu's work.³ All of Bourdieu's concepts are to be employed reflexively. They call for critical examination of all assumptions and presuppositions not only of the sociological object investigated but also of the stance and location of the researcher relative to the object studied. An example of reflexive thinking would be to say that the study of organizations is itself a field of struggle over what good organizational analysis should look like. At one point the authors do offer some reflexive insight when they acknowledge that their article itself can be thought of as an expression of struggle in the academic field to gain a more sociological understanding of organizations as opposed to an economic one more likely to be found in business and management schools. Such reflexive insight might have received more attention in the article.

This is not to claim that Bourdieu's work is of no use unless one accepts the total conceptual package. As Bourdieu himself suggested, and his close follower Wacquant echoes, the desired objective is to enhance new empirical research—offer a *generative* usage of his concepts—rather than just engage in theoretical exegesis of Bourdieu's work. Clearly there is a sizable body of good sociological research that has made but partial borrowings from Bourdieu by raising our critical awareness of important features of the social world. And certainly Bourdieu himself made selective borrowings from the classic writers in sociology, such as Marx, Durkheim, and Weber. Still, there is a systematic unity to Bourdieu's approach that is seldom

¹ Although capital, habitus, and field are widely recognized today as Bourdieu's master concepts, there is a broader list of concepts, such as symbolic power and violence, doxa, classification struggles, and reflexivity that characterize Bourdieu's work. The authors use sparingly the Bourdieusian language of symbolic power and violence but do call attention to the importance of symbolic struggle in organizational life. From a Bourdieusian perspective, the capacity to impose meanings as legitimate would be an important part of organizational life. Yet, except to say that the view of action as dispositional is stronger than intentionalist and rational action theory that seem so prominent in much organizational theorizing, the authors do not explore in depth how symbolic domination may be a central characteristic of organizational life. And, as we note below, the theme of reflexivity is one central concern of Bourdieu that does not find much echo in Emirbayer and Johnson's article.

² Emirbayer (1997) draws some of his inspiration for relational analysis from similar sources to that of Bourdieu, notably from Ernst Cassirer. Both also see relational thinking in Marx. Where they differ is that Emirbayer also draws from the American pragmatist tradition, notably from John Dewey, whereas that was not part of Bourdieu's early intellectual formation. Some (Kestenbaum 1977; Ostrow 1987; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 122) have suggested there are important parallels between Bourdieu's thinking and that of Dewey notably on the importance of habit in human action.

³ Reflexivity is an enduring theme throughout Bourdieu's work that one finds from *The Craft of Sociology* (Bourdieu et al. 1991[1968]) to *Pascalian Meditations* (Bourdieu 2000[1997]).

grasped let alone employed and it is the originality of Emirbayer and Johnson's article to do that for the study of organizations.

The authors are right in stressing the relational method in Bourdieu's sociology. Bourdieu sees all his master concepts as linked relationally. Definitionally they do not stand alone in Bourdieu's thinking (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 96). Strictly speaking, Bourdieu does not offer a theory of fields, a theory of capital, or a theory of habitus, as stand-alone conceptual perspectives. Yet a tendency in the American appropriation of Bourdieu is to extract one concept from the overall orienting framework and to try to test it empirically. Thus, for example, in the sociology of education one finds the theory of cultural capital as if that could be operationalized non-rationally (Lareau and Weininger 2004; Swartz 2005b).⁴ And in the study of organizations, while Bourdieu's concept of field has gained some attention, particularly from those working in the neo-institutional perspective, habitus is seldom mentioned. But the dynamics of fields in Bourdieu's perspective necessarily call on his concepts of capital and habitus to generate practices.

The authors bring not only a perspective of the three conceptual pillars of Bourdieu to organizational analysis but they also offer a corrective to an imbalance already appearing in the borrowings from Bourdieu by some organizational researchers. While the concept of field is gaining inroads, few studies in organizational analysis employ habitus.⁵ Yet in Bourdieu's thinking the dynamics of fields are only partially understood without the dispositions of habitus of actors. It takes both habitus and field—and capital—to connect micro and macro levels of analysis that should concern all organizational research. Emirbayer and Johnson make a compelling case for why and how the concept of habitus should inform organizational research. As the article notes, DiMaggio and Powell (1991), in their landmark book that helped chart the direction for the neo-institutional view, saw considerable potential in the idea of habitus for organizational study. But that promise has not thus far been fulfilled in neo-institutional research. And the cognitive turn in that area

⁴ The piecemeal approach to Bourdieu's work is most notable in the case of his concept of cultural capital, undoubtedly the most widely known and most applied of Bourdieu's conceptual language, particularly in the sociology of education and culture. Yet, Bourdieu did not offer a theory of cultural capital per se. Cultural capital is a concept Bourdieu invented to identify the importance of cultural resources in modern stratified societies, but it was always just one—albeit a very important one—among a variety of types of power resources—capitals—that individuals and groups accumulate and exchange in order to enhance their positions in modern stratified societies. The concept helped sensitize a generation of researchers to the more subtle but important cultural facts shaping educational outcomes. Lareau's (1987, 1989; Lareau and Horvat 1999) work is one excellent example of research taking Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital in new and interesting directions including in the organizational context of education. Yet even Lareau and Weininger (2004), in their insightful analysis of two mothers negotiating advantages for their children with their teachers, attempt to capture more with the concept of cultural capital than Bourdieu himself would have tried (he would have also used the concept of habitus to identify dispositional features such as expectations for what individuals can or cannot do in specific interactional situations such as with school authorities like teachers.) and give no explicit attention to field.

⁵ Hallett (2003) is one important study that does bring habitus into organizational analysis. Yet, while this study links the dispositional character of practices to a meso-level of organizational culture as a negotiated order that includes the struggle to define situations (symbolic power) in organizational life, it remains anchored in an interactionist perspective that does not move as far in connecting interactions in organizations to larger macro structures (struggles over economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital in the field of power and statist capital in the state) as Bourdieu's field perspective would call for.

only partially taps the dispositional character of Bourdieu's concept. The corporal dimension is frequently overlooked. Bringing habitus into organizational analysis, the authors contend, will help link macro-level phenomena of change to micro-level processes. Change can be provoked by the mismatch of the expectations of habitus and the constraints and opportunities available in organizations. Structural inertia can also be illuminated by the interaction between habitus attuned to past socialization and current organizational position.

In discussing the significance of position taking within organizations, the authors rightfully insist on the importance of actors bringing habitus to bear on those actions. Practices flow from the intersection of habitus with capital and field positions. Yet Bourdieu also shows that habitus is continuously adaptive and that organizations themselves can instill certain dispositions that do not trace back to early family socializations. This dynamic/adaptive character of habitus is not stressed in the article but would be something that organizational researchers would also want to be attentive to.

Furthermore, the concept of field in neo-institutional analysis is at times presented devoid of Bourdieu's understanding of capital as a power resource in arenas of struggle. Moreover, the concept of capital is seldom employed within a relational perspective. Capital is reconceptualized by Bourdieu to designate not only material but a wide variety of power resources. There can be, for example, financial, legal, technical, or political capitals that can become both the objects and instruments of struggle in fields within and across organizations.

The article advances that a Bourdieusian perspective would help bring to the study of organizations a more sociology-centered understanding of organizations rather than current economic tendencies propagated by business and management schools. Armed with the concepts of field, capital, and habitus, this perspective shows the limitations of a rational actor approach to organizational behavior and managerial strategy. The stances ("position-takings") of organizations and their leadership seldom reduce to self-expressions of individuals or narrow calculations of self or organizational interest: rather they emerge as compromised outcomes of the whole complex of struggles and negotiations of multiple interests in inter- and intra-organizational fields that unfold over time.

Bourdieu's field analytic perspective offers conceptual gains in organizational analysis to the more elusive notions of organizational context, environment, or population. It does not prematurely limit focus to particular industries or populations thereby missing broader structuring effects that are operative. It suggests configurations of organizations that are both structured by and embedded in power relations of struggle over valued resources and over the legitimate right to value resources. And combined with Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital it provides a powerful means of linking macro structures to micro-level processes. This is useful because, as Perrow (1991) has argued, the texture of modern social life is increasingly one in which large organizations compete for our allegiances, offer opportunities, and impose constraints. In his words "*large organizations have absorbed society.*"

But in this very strength lies also a danger of reification of organizations and limiting the inclusion of relevant field entities to formally organized bodies. Of course the purpose of the article is to show the potential usefulness of Bourdieu's

thinking for the study of organizations. Yet, as the article acknowledges, Bourdieu's concept of field demands a more comprehensive perspective, than say a population ecology, in that it does not limit inclusion to a single class of entities, such as pharmaceutical companies, but searches for "field effects" across different levels of analysis, and different types and levels of institutional life. Field positions can be occupied by individuals, social networks, social groups, and institutions, as well as formal organizations. The authors do explicitly warn in note 11 against limiting the search for field effects to just formal organizations but the point is worth highlighting even more. Not fields of organizations per se but fields of specific types of struggle over particular types of capitals, which may or may not be limited to organizational bodies, should be the constructed object of research.

The authors address the issue of relations between organization fields and other fields, such as the field of social classes, the economy, and governmental agencies. However, they say very little about states, even though governmental agencies are increasingly important in playing regulatory roles in modern societies. They are not organizations like others in this respect, since according to Bourdieu they try to regulate in the field of power the rate of exchange among the different forms of capital in the struggle to monopolize the legitimate forms of power. What kinds of relationships between fields of organizations and the state needs to be worked out conceptually and empirically. This is not a shortcoming of the article but another chapter to be added to the organizational analysis of modern societies.

The authors point out that the field analytic perspective can be used at different levels of organizational analysis. Most obvious is inter-organizational interactions. Combined with the relational perspective, a field outlook would shift attention from intrinsic properties of individual units to relations between units, such as interlocking directorships, suppliers, ownership, and market competitors. The authors see the field perspective as having distinct advantages over currently prevailing alternative perspectives. Field stresses the dynamics of conflict often downplayed in the search for broad isomorphic patterns in the neo-institutional perspective. Fields call for specifying the quality of relationships (dominant/dominated) missed in population ecology. And a field view encompasses the concrete ties identified in social network analysis but also calls attention to broader institutional effects, such as the role of symbolic capital, that are real but not reducible to particular ties.

Field analysis can also illuminate structures and processes at the level of particular organizations, or "organization-as-field" as the authors call it. The internal life of the firm can be analyzed as a field of struggle, as Bourdieu (2005[2000]) does in his analysis of French firms, by portraying familiar tensions among ownership capital, managerial prerogative, finance, and sales as opposing power resources competing to be the most legitimate authority for guiding the firm. Thus, organizations are not conceptualized as single unified actors. The concept of field encourages the researcher to connect struggles internal to the firm to broader power conflicts in society.

In addition, the authors try to identify a meso-level "*space of struggle for organizational power*" (an "internal field of power") and here there is need for further conceptual and empirical clarification and specification. It is not quite clear what they include in "space of struggle of organizational power." Bourdieu uses the term "field of power" to designate the "ruling class" in modern society but gives this

arena of power a structuralist and relational rather than substantialist rendering as the authors acknowledge. This is best spelled out in *The State Nobility* (Bourdieu 1996[1989]). The field of power is situated in the upper region of Bourdieu's social space where individuals and groups have considerable volume of capital. The field of power is a macro-level arena of struggle across a range of power fields, such as the intellectual field, the economic field, the religious field, and the cultural field, where leading agents of these respective fields struggle to impose their particular capital—cultural capital and economic capital most notably—as the most legitimate for dominating an entire social order. Bourdieu describes the field of power as an arena of struggle among significant capital holders over the rate of exchange among the most valued capitals in a society. This level of field analysis is different from one focusing on struggle within particular power fields, such as the academic field, the religious field, or the scientific field, over the legitimate definition and accumulation of their respective capitals. The field of power designates struggle between power fields, most notably between the economic field and the cultural field in modern societies.

The authors take the idea of “field of power” and attempt to extend it in two directions while trying carefully not to confuse it with Bourdieu's original concept. On the one hand, the space of struggle for organizational power targets an array of organizations competing for the right to be the most legitimate expression of organization in particular sectors. The authors cite illustrations ranging from the international fashion industry (Chanel vs. Hermès) to the major schools (Orthodox and Reform) of New York City synagogic life. This might suggest a smaller “core” or “center” of entities within particular fields of organizations. So there would be an “inner core” of organizations within the organizational field of the fashion industry or a “religious center” within the organizational field of New York City synagogic life. Would it be a kind of center and periphery demarcation within any given organizational field? Or is the analytical point nothing more than to stress that field struggle can involve multiple types of capital? It is not clear what is different from Bourdieu's delineation of dominant and dominated positions within particular fields. Do the authors have in mind a kind of field differentiation that overlaps significantly with or is orthogonal to Bourdieu's challengers/status quo distinction? Does it point to the power to organize per se as another kind of capital? Does it point to some kind of power resource that defines relations among different organizational fields—though it would be difficult to see the connection between the international fashion field and New York City synagogic life!

On the other hand, space of struggle for organizational power also refers to a sort of “internal field of power” *within* an organization. Again some of the same questions might be raised at this level of analysis. Since in Bourdieu's concept of field actors often engage different types of capital in the struggle over the definition and distribution of the most legitimate form of capital, it is not clear what the conceptual gain would be. The critical point is not so much to get Bourdieu right, though there is virtue in properly interpreting ones theoretical source, but to generate an object for empirical investigation that has been hitherto neglected. Yet, at this stage in the authors' formulations, it is not clear just what this “space of struggle for organizational power” would include that is not already encompassed by Bourdieu's concept of field.

One criticism of the article, and one that Bourdieu himself might voice, is that it does not apply the proposed Bourdieusian organizational framework to an empirical case. The article offers an excellent translation of Bourdieu's key concepts to show how a Bourdieusian perspective might usefully orient new and reframe existing organizational research in fruitful ways. However, Bourdieu repeatedly insisted on constant dialogue between theory and research, as the article acknowledges, and viewed uneasily programmatic statements as remaining too theoretical. While Emirbayer and Johnson reference numerous sources with empirical examples, they do not offer their own illustration.⁶ In the final analysis, the strength of any conceptual framework in the social sciences lies in its ability to generate new empirical investigations with fresh theoretical insight. I hope the article will inspire such *generative* results.

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⁶ There are a couple of references in the article to Victoria Johnson's work on opera houses, but her study of the Paris opera does not serve as an illustrative constructed object of research in Emirbayer and Johnson's article here.

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David L. Swartz is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Boston University. He is the author of *Culture & Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (University of Chicago Press 1997) and co-editor (with Vera L. Zolberg) of *After Bourdieu: Influence, Critique, Elaboration* (Kluwer Academic Publishers 2004). He is a Senior Editor and Book Review Editor for *Theory and Society*. His research interests include the study of elites and stratification, education, culture, religion, and social theory, and he is currently writing a book on the political sociology of Pierre Bourdieu.