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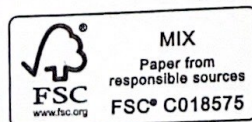
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PIERRE BOURDIEU

Habitus, field and capital in rock climbing

Simon Beames and John Telford

This chapter focuses on the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. During his career, Bourdieu wrote prolifically on a remarkably wide range of issues in society. As examining all of his work in one chapter is not possible, we will focus on three of Bourdieu's concepts that will enable us to see the social world through his eyes: habitus, field and capital. We will use examples from the world of rock climbing to illustrate the theory.

Biography

Pierre Bourdieu was born into unremarkable and relatively humble circumstances in the south-west of France in 1930. At the time of his death in 2002, however, he was firmly established as one of the most influential thinkers of his generation, and also as one of the most outspoken and energetic intellectual activists of the last twenty years. He enjoyed a stellar academic career and taught at a number of elite institutions. In 1981 he became a professor at the most prestigious institution in the French university system: the Collège de France. In 1995 he was awarded a gold medal by the National Centre for Scientific Research. One of his many books, *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*, was named by the International Sociological Association as one of the ten most important sociological works of the twentieth century. Remarkably, it was not until the 1980s that Bourdieu's work became commonly known in the English-speaking world. By the late 1980s he had become one of the most frequently cited French social scientists in the United States.

Bourdieu did not confine himself to an academic career spanning philosophy, sociology and ethnology. His insistence on the importance of connecting theory with real life is evidenced by his contribution to discussions and activism in a wide range of areas, including art, literature, education, language, culture, television,

sport, anti-globalization and the rights of workers. The main thread that ran through his work was an interest in the ways that culture and class combine to create power.

Bourdieu's theory of social practice

One reason that we are drawn to Bourdieu's work is that we find some of his key concepts very helpful for understanding everyday social behaviour in general, and outdoor adventure specifically. As explained in Chapter 1, two broad schools of thought have traditionally existed in sociology. Each attempts to provide a framework for understanding the way people think and act in the social world. On the one hand, there are those who see human behaviour as being heavily influenced by external forces. On the other hand, there are those who believe that individuals have a high degree of 'agency', as they are largely in control of the decisions they make. The former is often referred to as a structuralist or objectivist point of view. That is to say, there are objective social structures that influence the way people behave. The latter is often referred to as a subjectivist stance, as every individual is consciously and subjectively capable of directing their own thoughts and actions without being overly influenced by external social forces (see, for example, May and Powell, 2008).

Let's imagine a climber decided to chisel some new holds on El Capitan's iconic route 'The Nose'. This would undoubtedly cause an uproar that would reverberate across the international climbing community. But why? There are no laws against chipping. Relatively few people will ever climb the route and those that do climb it aren't obliged to use the chipped holds if they don't want to. It is even arguable that after a couple of years of weathering the chipped holds will no longer be visually obtrusive. If large-scale quarrying is common place in the world's industrial mines, then what's the big fuss over a little chipping on a rock climb? Well, it is clearly not a question of how many people will come into contact with the chipped holds, and nor is it a question of comparative physical impact on the natural world. It is entirely a question of the values and assumptions that a dominant culture ascribes to the relationship between climbers and iconic routes.

③ A structuralist perspective on this scenario would suggest that as new people enter the climbing community, they are gradually socialized into adopting the accepted, and often unquestioned, practices and beliefs. These normalized behaviours are subtly communicated through club meets, magazine articles, photographs, books, blogs and every other way that climbers interact. The climber responsible for the chipping must have come from a different community with very different traditions from those he or she encounters in Yosemite. A subjectivist perspective, on the other hand, would contend that every individual climber has come to an ethical position on the question of chipping holds through a free and rational process of consideration.

Bourdieu, however, suggests that neither a structuralist nor a subjectivist viewpoint adequately accounts for the complex workings of the social world. It is not the inevitable fate of human beings to adopt the values and behaviours of their

social environment; nor are human beings entirely capable of perceiving the social influences on them and making independent, rational decisions on that basis. ✓
 Bourdieu asserts that the opposition between structuralism and subjectivism is a false dichotomy that impedes our understanding of the social world. He notes that: 'Of all the oppositions that artificially divide social science, the most fundamental, and the most ruinous, is the one that is set up between subjectivism and objectivism' ✓
 (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 25).

So, if objectivism and subjectivism won't do, what is the alternative? This is where Bourdieu's work starts to fascinate us. He proposes that human agency and objective social structures exist in a dynamic, interdependent relationship (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). Understood in this way, people are able to think, choose and act, thanks to their human capacity to be aware of themselves in relation to other people and institutions of the social world (such as education systems, established religions or sporting organizations). However, this ability for self-determination exists within certain limits that are established by the common practices and structures of the social world. *crux*

In the UK, the predominant attitude amongst climbers is that bolting should only take place according to very specific guidelines. This is in order to maintain a tradition that values a 'leave no trace' approach to the rock, upholds the value of adventurous climbing whereby the leader places protection, and honours the possibility that what cannot be climbed by this traditional method today may well be possible in the future (see Lewis, 2000). If a UK climber schooled in this tradition were to move to France, he or she would experience a much more liberal approach to the use of bolts, which is supported by an equally logical rationale. It is likely that this new 'normal' behaviour would highlight for the individual the way that their previous opinions, thoughts and practices had been influenced by the dominant values of the UK climbing community. For example, bolting a run-out pitch on a classic mountain route would be unthinkable in the UK, whereas in France it would be perfectly reasonable. However, it is only unthinkable in the UK because a particular set of social values encourages the belief that it is unthinkable. Because it is unthinkable, bolting is 'unavailable' even as a potential course of action. Therefore, it is possible for an individual to self-impose limits on his or her behaviour at the same time as believing that his or her freedom to act has not been restricted. This example illustrates the complex interplay between the influence of social structures and the subjective ability of individuals to direct their lives. ?

Let's take another example. Imagine that Harriet and Vanessa (both seventeen years old) join an indoor climbing wall in their home town. With no previous experience of climbing or the climbing world, Harriet and Vanessa will come into contact for the first time with the established patterns of behaviour of the club members. Harriet and Vanessa will encounter new ways of speaking, behaving and dressing that are commonly expressed within their new community of friends. In addition, they will also be exposed to the predominant attitudes or values that are foundational to the culture of the club. For example, they will encounter dominant *Subcultural norms/values*

views on whether to use a Grigri or an ATC for belaying, attitudes towards safety and risk, beliefs about what is cool and not cool, and pick up cues regarding which members of the club carry high status and the reasons for this. As Harriet and Vanessa have had no previous experience of climbing culture, it is difficult for them to critique the behaviour and values of the climbing culture around them. If the culture of the club suggests to them in various ways, both explicit and implicit, that completing a climb without falling or resting on the rope is the 'purest' form of success, it is likely that they will accept and adopt this value.

To summarize, the basic notion to which Bourdieu calls our attention is that human behaviour is directly related to culture, social structures and power. To help us further understand this relationship and how it relates to outdoor adventure, we need to consider three of Bourdieu's important concepts: habitus, field and capital.

Habitus

Bourdieu (1990, p. 65) once asked: 'how can behaviour be regulated without being the product of obedience to rules?' This question was motivated by a belief that all cultures reveal patterns of conforming behaviour that cannot be explained in terms of explicitly stated laws, such as those relating to road speed limits, violent behaviour or paying income tax. These patterns are driven by objective social structures that are not explicitly stated or justified. How do cultural practices develop to the point of being unquestioned, and, perhaps more importantly, unquestionable, social norms?

Bourdieu suggests that through the experiences of everyday life (particularly formative experiences in the early years) individuals unconsciously adopt the social patterns and norms that surround them. Notions of what is 'right' and appropriate become ingrained, instinctive patterns of thought and behaviour. Bourdieu refers to these instinctive tendencies towards certain behaviours as habitus.

Habitus can be described as 'the values and dispositions gained from our cultural history that generally stay with us across contexts' (Webb *et al.*, 2002, p. 36). In other words, whether I am watching the Royal Ballet, working in a factory, dining out with my very wealthy cousins, sitting in a lecture at university or volunteering at a homeless shelter, my instinctive notions and actions with regard to what is normal, appropriate, interesting, funny, outrageous or distasteful will remain more or less the same. In addition, habitus is both individual and collective. Every individual person develops their own instinctive dispositions but, at the same time, groups of people from the same or a similar social environment will share a similar group habitus, and will share what Bourdieu terms doxa: foundational, unconsidered cultural beliefs.

Doxa encourages not only the acceptance of the way things are but, moreover, gives us a sense that the way things are is the way they ought to be (Jenkins, 2002, p. 156). This answers the question from two paragraphs earlier about how cultural practices develop; over time, values, attitudes and behaviours become ingrained into

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individuals' patterns of thought and action. Habitus is thus exhibited in every aspect of an individual's life. Interpersonal relationships, life expectations and choices, politics, religion, speech, gait, ways of dressing, the names we give our children – to name but a handful – all stem from and reflect the habitus.

We can see that the habitus is both a social context that influences what people think and do, and a way of explaining their particular dispositions. One way of thinking about dispositions for Bourdieu (1989) is that certain values and beliefs become thought of as 'common sense' (p. 19). However, if you have ever spent any time thinking about the concept of common sense, you will no doubt have come to the conclusion that it is easily undermined by the simple question: common to whom? So, while having bolted belay stations on a trad route in Red Rocks may be common sense to folk in the south-west of the United States, having no bolts whatsoever would be common sense to those in North Wales. Common sense and 'instinctive knowledge' come from the values that we have absorbed through living in our specific social contexts and will always have the potential to be entirely 'uncommon' in many other social contexts.

Let us return to our two climbers, Harriet and Vanessa, and assume that they share a very similar cultural and socio-economic background. As very close friends, they have also shared many experiences. Thus, their exposure to the various habituses of their upbringing, related to the cultures of their family, their school, their soccer team and their church, result in the individual habitus of each young woman being very similar. Now, imagine that when they finish secondary school, they decide to spend six months climbing at Smith Rock in Oregon. Here they encounter the habitus of the climbing community, which has similarities to and differences from the habitus of their climbing wall club. Living in a tent village with other climbers for months at a time involves exposure to all of the unwritten and unspoken social structures of that community over an extended, and probably very intense, period of time. Quite often, these structures manifest themselves as social 'norms' of what is valued and what behaviours are implicitly expected. Examples of what is valued might be a strict code for 'onsighting' a climb, left-wing politics, reggae music, and a welcoming attitude towards newly arrived, aspiring climbers. The local climbing habitus, then, will naturally confront Harriet and Vanessa's own attitudes and behaviours concerning climbing ethics, politics, music and how to treat young newcomers.

One aspect of the habitus that is interesting to consider is its transferability and durability. If, as Bourdieu argues, individuals are exposed to a range of different habituses over their lifetime, one might expect that all of the different values and dispositions will mingle together with the result that the habitus of one person shares little in common with that of anyone else. This would result in a constantly shifting amalgamation of instincts and behaviours that would make it difficult to identify any durable or ingrained social patterns in individuals or in groups of people. So, when Harriet and Vanessa move to the hippy-ish collective of Smith Rock for the summer, to what extent will they carry with them the individualist, career-motivated and elitist ways that were built up over years of growing up in a

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very affluent, middle-class section of society in Connecticut? Equally, to what extent will their attitudes and behaviours be influenced by the new social environment of the climbing community, with its vast collection of explicit and implicit norms?

Bourdieu (1977) argues that we are influenced most by the formative experiences of early life. This is not surprising as, particularly in early childhood, we are least questioning of the environment and practices that surround us. In addition, it is very common for people to spend their childhood years in the same geographical location, same familial structure and same social surroundings. Thus, when we are least aware of unconscious social influences and most exposed to a stable, relatively unchanging environment, we are most likely to develop the durable, instinctive dispositions that Bourdieu suggests form the habitus.

So far, we have argued that the habitus formed in our early years is highly influential in shaping our thoughts and actions for the rest of our life. If we were to return to our earlier discussion regarding structuralism and subjectivism, this would seem to suggest that Bourdieu falls firmly in the camp of the structuralists. However, we know that Bourdieu believes that human beings have a degree of conscious control (agency) over their lives, and the ability to step beyond the 'norm' and challenge or reject the dominant doxa (cultural beliefs).

Harriet and Vanessa have been exposed to the habitus of the climbing community in two different ways. The first consisted of one year as members of a climbing club near their homes. Let us say that this involved three hours once a week at the climbing gym. The second consisted of six months of living in a community away from their home town and with all the influences and expectations that entails. Would we expect the habitus of Harriet and Vanessa to be at all affected in the first scenario, given that habitus is durable across different social contexts? Is it possible that the habitus of Harriet and Vanessa is sufficiently durable to remain intact when they move to Oregon? In each scenario the new set of social circumstances that Harriet and Vanessa encounter can be described in Bourdieu's terms as a new field – the second of his concepts that we are examining in this chapter. Moving into different fields, each with its own identifiable habitus, creates the opportunity for new values and dispositions to be incorporated into the individual's habitus (Webb *et al.*, 2002, p. 37) at both a conscious and an unconscious level. We will now explore the concept of field in greater depth.

Field

Bourdieu (1989) uses the term field (or cultural field) to describe structured, social contexts that comprise rules and practices that engender particular ways of being and thinking. Climbing, education, music, religion, art and politics are examples of fields. Each field has its own specific logic, traditions of necessary behaviour, and networks of relations that are created and maintained by both individuals and institutions. It is within these cultural fields that the habitus develops as a product of what is accepted as logical, appropriate and relevant within that field. It is these

objective structures that will influence the way Harriet and Vanessa think during their time trying to climb hard routes at Smith Rock. As we can see, there is much more to their trip than having fun and becoming better climbers – although they may not be entirely aware of this!

For example, it may be that Harriet and Vanessa's school and home background was one where high test scores were considered very important. Those who gained high test scores were praised, accorded status in the community, and received material reward. Whether or not Harriet and Vanessa were students who achieved high test scores, Bourdieu's theory suggests that they will be affected by this cultural value and it will be absorbed into their habitus. In the new cultural field of climbing, this 'test score' aspect of their habitus may manifest itself in a situation whereby even if the climbing community places no value on how hard somebody can climb, Harriet and Vanessa will instinctively be drawn into feelings and behaviours associated with what grade they are, or are not, able to climb. Their instinctive disposition will be to unconsciously revert to the values of their habitus when they consider their own or others' ability on the rock, even if, consciously, they no longer wish to espouse these values. *? interesting*

Harriet and Vanessa's habitus, at a less-than-conscious level, resists the cultural values embedded in the habitus of the climbing community. However, at the same less-than-conscious level it is also slowly modified. So, it might be that little by little the more outdoor lifestyle of the tent village climbing community becomes not just manageable, or even comfortable, but instinctively preferable to the more indoor way of life of their upbringing. Bourdieu (1977, pp. 78–9) argues that this process happens in such a subtle yet powerful way that human beings are capable of subconsciously reconfiguring their past to fit with their present. *wow!*

These examples of one habitus confronting another refer to interactions at an unconscious level. However, habitus can also be impacted at a conscious level. Although socio-cultural structures can be very powerful, they are also human creations and, as such, they are vulnerable to examination and challenge. Human beings do possess the capacity to take a step back, view a situation with fresh eyes, and determine to do things differently. The key to a new perspective on life becoming embedded in the habitus lies in the *doing*, or what Bourdieu (1977) refers to as the 'practice', of everyday social life. Simply having the new vision or understanding at an intellectual level is not sufficient to impact upon an individual's instinctive dispositions; it needs to be lived out and experienced over and over again. The opportunity for this, of course, is made more or less possible by the dominant surrounding culture. ✓

New cultural fields also highlight certain attitudes or actions of the habitus that are not 'useful'. If the dominant attitude within the climbing community is that all institutions of authority are not to be trusted and anyone who thinks otherwise is foolishly naive, it is likely that Harriet and Vanessa will become more amenable to the dominant point of view. This is because people have the capacity to understand 'the rules of the game' (Bourdieu, 1977), or the conventions of the social situations they inhabit, and modify their dispositions and values accordingly as a means of improving their position within a field. ✓

To return to our earlier question of the relative influence of each of the two climbing community scenarios – indoor club and tent village – we can see that the latter is likely to have the greater effect on the two new climbers. The scenario involving eating, playing and sleeping at Smith Rock provides greater opportunities for the habitus to be influenced at both conscious and unconscious levels due to the intense nature of the experience, and the removal of a competing cultural field. This may seem obvious or 'common sense', but Bourdieu's explanation helps us to understand at a theoretical level how an extended period of time in a new and different community is more likely to significantly influence an individual than short-term, regular exposure.

Up to this point we have stated that fields are structured social contexts that are made up of particular values, institutions, and ways of being. We have also stated that habitus develops as a result of the qualities of a field. However, we have not yet discussed how the logic, the networks of relations, and traditional behaviours of a field come into being or are maintained. This brings us to the third and final of Bourdieu's concepts we wish to discuss: capital.

Capital

An essential feature of a field is what Bourdieu (1986) refers to as the forms of capital within it. Capital is anything that is designated as being of value within a given field. Bourdieu identifies four kinds of capital: economic capital (money, property), cultural capital (knowledge, skills, aesthetic preferences), social capital (informal interpersonal networks) and symbolic capital (prestige, recognition) (Bourdieu, 1986, 1989).

An interesting aspect of capital is the way in which it is context specific. What is regarded as capital in one set of social circumstances may not be in another. Bourdieu (1993) reminds us that 'capital is effective in relation to a particular field' (p. 73). Someone who regularly solos 5.12 may possess significant capital and, therefore perhaps, a high degree of power, respect and choice in the field of rock climbing. However, this symbolic capital of being a bold rock climber is probably not transferable to the cultural fields of sculpture, French cuisine or archaeology. The people within these fields might not fully understand what free soloing was, and might not care. On the other hand, it can be possible to transfer capital from one field to another. Arnold Schwarzenegger is perhaps a master of this game, as he first 'traded' his body-building success for a career in Hollywood, and then used these forms of capital to enter the world of politics. In any given field the amount of power a person or group enjoys depends upon the capital they possess. In turn, the greater the amount of capital possessed, the more able a person or group is to influence what is considered to be of value.

Bourdieu argues that individuals and groups struggle within fields to improve their standing in relation to the capital that defines the field (Bourdieu, 1989, 1993). The cultural norms and rules of a field are a consequence of the social conflicts that occur within it. These conflicts centre first around what constitutes legitimate capital

4 capital
* professional capital

yes /

(what is desirable or of value) and, second, how that capital can be accessed and employed to people's advantage. What is perhaps most fascinating about this situation is how the rules of the game can be dominated – and even manipulated – by those with power. Power comes from possessing capital!

It is important to keep in mind, therefore, that fields are not rigid, fixed social environments. The outcome of the constant struggle for capital among the members of the field is that the dominant, commonly accepted perception of what is considered as valuable, desirable and normal is constantly shifting. Usually this is a gradual and subtle evolution, but occasionally it can be dramatic and sudden. Webb *et al.* (2002) state that 'fields are fluid and dynamic, mainly because they are always being changed both by internal practices and politics' (p. 28). As a direct result, what constitutes capital and how this capital is used are also ever-changing. While today the rules of the game in one climbing area might deem it acceptable to use a 'stick clip' to clip the first bolt on a route, they might not in a year from now if people possessing sufficient capital are able to alter the dominant value in this field of struggle.

English language speaking climbing?

Now let us return to Bourdieu's concept of the habitus. Consider the above idea of 'fluidity' in combination with the ways by which the habitus can change and evolve. It is possible to see how a field is both the cause and the effect of habitus, which is, in turn, both created by, and creator of, fields. Habitus and field exist in symbiotic relation with each other. A field is produced and maintained by the individuals and institutions within it, and the habitus results from the absorption of the structures of the field into the individuals' ways of being – in thought and action. It is through this relationship between field and habitus that Bourdieu proposes to have transcended the dualism of subjectivist and objectivist approaches to social practice. The behaviour of human beings in the social world – social practice – is thus understood as a dynamic, interdependent relationship between individual agency and the rules and practices of cultural fields.

Conclusions

Even if you understand the 'Bourdieu basics' as described in this chapter, how does this help our understanding of the world of outdoor adventure – or even just *the world*? Well, we suggest that Bourdieu's three concepts give us a language that enables us to have a deeper and more meaningful discussion about the world in which we live. Armed with this language we are more able to have a sophisticated debate about how we are able to influence, and be influenced by, the social circumstances that characterize life at the crag, in the living room or in the lecture hall.

We know that Bourdieu argues that all humans are heavily influenced by the habitus. The habitus is shaped by our socio-cultural experiences and accounts for our 'common-sense' thinking. We also know that people possess different forms of capital (e.g. symbolic, cultural, economic) and that what is considered to be capital varies from field to field. Appropriate forms of capital can be used to access resources

and power within a given field (or site of cultural struggle). Finally, we know that what serves as capital is not fixed; what is deemed valuable by people is constantly being defined and re-defined. Human beings are constrained by the social rules of fields which they inhabit. However, to varying degrees, we all exert self-serving influence over the 'rules of the game' that characterize our cultural fields, irrespective of whether we abide by these rules, bend them or try to change them.

We encourage you to re-examine your various social worlds through Bourdieu's three concepts outlined in this chapter. Although the concepts of habitus, field and capital are understandable and useful in and of themselves, we argue that, when used together, they become a particularly useful set of tools for analysing the various social situations in which we find ourselves. The next time you go climbing, take a look around and see if you can use these three concepts to better understand what people are doing and why.

Further reading

Of the references listed below, read Webb *et al.* (2002) for a very accessible overview of Bourdieu's work. May and Powell (2008) will help to contextualize Bourdieu within the broader field of social theory. Try Bourdieu's paper on 'Social space and symbolic power' (1989) as your first read of something by the man himself.

Finally, the following articles provide further examples of Bourdieu's concepts being used to increase understanding of the worlds of outdoor adventure and of sport.

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