



# From four to zero? The social mechanisms of symbolic domination in the UK accounting field



Lindsay Stringfellow\*, Kevin McMeeking, Mairi Maclean

University of Exeter Business School, UK

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 18 July 2012

Received in revised form 29 March 2014

Accepted 4 June 2014

Available online 17 June 2014

### Keywords:

Bourdieu

Domination

Symbolic power

Symbolic violence

Big Four

## ABSTRACT

Corporate failures and financial crises periodically lead to speculation and critique of the Big Four in the UK. Wide-reaching regulatory changes and reforms have emerged as a consequence, yet the overall dominance of the large accounting firms remains an immutable truth. This paper explores the dominance of the Big Four drawing on Bourdieu's rich system of thought, and in particular the role of symbolic productions, and how symbolic power and symbolic violence are deployed to secure the social integration of an arbitrary order. We document the social mechanisms of symbolic domination that secure the Big Four's position in the social structure of professional accounting firms. We identify a circular system of double-structured domination, where three mechanisms of euphemised discourse, rites of institution and socialisation normalise symbolic systems and disabling constraints for smaller firms. In addition to interviewing informants working in the field, this paper examines recent political challenges that have placed the role of the Big Four and their domination under increasing scrutiny. These challenges bring into focus issues of recognition and resistance to symbolic modes of domination, and we contemplate the impact of such discourses on the dynamics of the UK accounting field, and the Big Four's continued influence.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

... at the end of a period of development characterized, particularly, by a long series of mergers and a profound transformation of corporate structures, we see that... the struggle is confined to a small number of powerful competing firms which, far from passively adjusting to a 'market situation', are able to shape that situation actively. (Bourdieu, 2005: 201)

In the UK, the Big Four have continued to consolidate their positions and to dominate the field of professional services performed by accounting firms, in terms of both influence and market capitalisation. Critiques levelled at the large accounting firms, and the strategies they have pursued to achieve their position of global domination, will be well known to readers of this journal (Carnegie and Napier, 2010; Hanlon, 1994; Malsch and Gendron, 2013; Smith-Lacroix et al., 2012). In this paper, we are particularly interested in exploring the symbolic processes that sustain their domination in the UK context. Adding to research that explores the underlying dynamics and relations of power in the professional accounting field (Brivot, 2011; Carter and Spence, 2014; Kornberger et al., 2010; Mueller et al., 2011;

\* Corresponding author at: University of Exeter Business School, Rennes Drive, Exeter EX4 4PU, UK. Tel.: +44 01392 722477; fax: +44 01392 723210. E-mail address: [l.j.stringfellow@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:l.j.stringfellow@exeter.ac.uk) (L. Stringfellow).

Unerman and O'Dwyer, 2004), this paper explores how this situation has emerged using the theoretical lens of Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1990).

The influence of Bourdieu's system of thought has been profound across the social sciences (Dobbin, 2008; Emirbayer and Johnson, 2008; Maclean et al., 2012) and is increasingly being applied in accounting literature (Cooper and Coulson, 2013; Everett, 2004; Gracia and Oats, 2012; Malsch et al., 2011; Neu et al., 2008; Ramirez, 2001). His theories are seen as particularly powerful for revealing taken-for-granted power relations and systems of domination that mask the status quo, thus yielding valuable insight for critical, moral and political inquiries (Cooper, 2002; Golsorkhi et al., 2009; Kerr and Robinson, 2012; Spence and Carter, 2014). As such, his lens has been used to view accounting regulation, technologies of governance, the accounting profession and to challenge accounting academia (Malsch et al., 2011).

In this paper, we aim to document the social mechanisms of symbolic domination and reproduction within the field of professional accounting firms, and explore the role that the Big Four and other powerful agents play in underpinning the social integration of an arbitrary order (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Symbolic productions aim to construct reality through monopolising "the power to impose instruments of knowledge and expression of social reality (taxonomies), which are arbitrary (but unrecognized as such)" (Bourdieu, 1977: 115). Symbolic power results from a web of institutional conditions and connections that empower dominant agents through an underlying belief in their legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1991: 167). The 'rules of the game' tend to be prescribed by dominant agents, whilst dominated agents misrecognise the arbitrariness of power dynamics or accept the rules as legitimate due to their inherent understanding of their own position and positions of possibility within the field (Bourdieu, 1977). This is achieved through symbolic violence, an invisible 'magical' mode of domination that Bourdieu uses to explain how doxa, or common sense, legitimises the production of an unequal distribution of capital through concealing power struggles and positional conflicts (Bourdieu, 1977; Everett, 2002; Wacquant, 1987). Misrecognition is central to symbolic domination, and goes beyond social agents' simply not being aware of objective reality, but instead means that they subjectively recognise practices within a shared cultural framework that conceals objective reality.

We contribute to the growing body of accounting scholarship that uses Bourdieu's conceptual framework to unearth systems of domination (Cooper and Coulson, 2013; Golsorkhi et al., 2009). The theoretical contribution of this paper involves our documentation of the institutional and micro mechanisms of symbolic domination, and how, collectively, these mechanisms are able to support the Big Four's domination in the UK accounting field. In approaching this issue, we explore three interrelated questions: How do social mechanisms of symbolic domination operate? What are the conditions of their effectiveness? And how are symbolic modes of domination experienced by its victims? Empirically, our study evolves over a 6-year period, in which we collect data from key informants in small, mid-tier and Big Four firms in the UK, and draw on evidence presented to the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee regarding auditor concentration, to capture a range of perspectives of different agents regarding the social dynamics of the field.

We identify a chain of mechanisms, both transformational and situational, that permit modes of symbolic domination. At a micro-level, the Big Four and other agents deploy euphemised discourses of 'four to zero' that play on systemic fear of the repercussions of further consolidation, to colour perceptions and direct legislative changes in their interests. This leads to the institutionalisation of new regulatory and monitoring regimes, which place disabling constraints on smaller firms, and instil a sense of generalised fear and inadequacy that constitutes symbolic violence. Banks institutionalise processes of symbolic domination through their implicit privileging of the Big Four, and through objectifying mechanisms such as restrictive covenants and discriminatory lending practices that legitimate the symbolic capital of the Big Four. Professional institutes engage in symbolic productions through naming and recategorising smaller firms as 'business advisors', thereby inculcating classificatory schemes that affect the symbolic capital of firms, as well as habituating new forms of practices. The potential for recognition and resistance to domination that can emerge from actors and discourses at the core and periphery of the field (Guénin-Paracini and Gendron, 2010; Smith-Lacroix et al., 2012) is also discussed, providing a timely insight into the dynamics of power in the accounting field given contemporary debates regarding competition and choice, and the future role of large accounting firms in the UK.

The rest of the paper is structured in four main sections. First, we provide a concise overview of Bourdieu's system of thought, the symbolic production of domination, and how these ideas can be used to frame insights into the structure of domination in the accounting field. Next, we present our research methods, which owing to the research problem and the demands of Bourdieu's paradigm involved an evolving relational analysis, drawing on multiple data collection instruments, to explore embedded discourses in historical and institutional context. In the third section we present the findings of our analysis where we explore the mechanisms and context of domination, and how symbolic modes of domination are experienced by members of the field. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the implications of our analysis, its limitations and our suggestions for future work.

## **2. Bourdieusian praxeology: symbolic productions and the structuring of domination**

### *2.1. Bourdieu's system of thought*

The basic elements of the 'Bourdieuian triad' are the concepts of field (denoting the social structure), the various forms of capital (relating to power relations) and the habitus (the role of the individual) (Dobbin, 2008; Malsch et al., 2011; Maclean

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1001416>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1001416>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)