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Public Relations Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/pubrev

Capital as the lens that Bourdieu Pierres through: Public relations, social theory, and rhetoric

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Pierre Bourdieu
 Kenneth Burke
 Forms of capital
 Social capital
 Rhetoric
 Four master tropes

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore the limitations of Bourdieu's "capital" with the help of Burke's four master tropes: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. Both Bourdieu and Burke were concerned with theoretical reductionism. I claim that Bourdieu could not help but be reductive insofar as his metaphor of capital became the totalizing lens through which he understood society. First, I review Bourdieu's forms of capital, noting how capital serves as the *sine qua non* of his theory of practice. Second, I situate Bourdieu within the PR literature. Third, I read Bourdieu's "capital" through Burke's (1941) four master tropes. Reading Bourdieu through Burke enables PR scholars to better understand the limitations in Bourdieu's terminology, which leads to debunking, materialist reductionism, and relativism. I conclude with implications for future research adopting Bourdieusian and Burkean approaches to public relations.

Public relations scholars have long been interested in applying Pierre Bourdieu's critical theory to public relations. In 2005, for example, Harris used Bourdieu's theoretical framework to analyze Tattersall's public relations. Tattersall's, a private gambling company, was mystifying its publics. Tattersall's was reaping major profits from addicted gamblers, and then running PR campaigns to highlight how they funded research to combat gambling addiction. There was no shortage of irony in that gambling addiction was being used to fund research on how to combat gambling addiction. Bourdieu was an apt critic for such a scenario.

Rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke might say that Bourdieu's theoretical "terminology" fit with Harris' anecdote (Burke, 1941, p. 430). Bourdieu's metaphor of capital was, in this instance, truly representative of what was occurring at Tattersall's. However, debunking results when critics apply Bourdieu's metaphor of capital to non-representative contexts (p. 430). For example, genuine cooperation can appear as just another shrewd attempt for individuals to accrue capital. Society can easily be explained as an unending struggle for individuals to gain capital. No matter who you are or what you do, you must struggle to acquire different forms of capital in Bourdieu's framework. The totalizing explanatory power of Bourdieu's metaphor of capital leads to several problems that PR scholars should be wary of, including debunking, materialist reductionism, and relativism. Oddly enough, Bourdieu stated that he wanted to avoid reductionism, especially reducing all human behavior to either economics or communication (Bourdieu, 1983/1986, pp. 252–253). With the help of Burke, I claim that Bourdieu could not help but be reductive insofar as his metaphor of capital became the totalizing lens through which he understood society. Just as reduction was at the heart of Bourdieu's concerns, reduction was also at the forefront of Burke's mind.

I do not invoke Burke arbitrarily. Other scholars have attested to significant theoretical overlap between Bourdieu and Burke. Wacquant, one of Bourdieu's students and fellow collaborators, drew upon Burke to describe how the gym culture of inner city boxers in Chicago supplied boxers with "vocabularies of motives" and "acceptance frames" that justified risking and destroying their "bodily capital" (Wacquant, 1995, p. 83). In this article, Wacquant provided an explicit link between rhetoric and capital: "Vocabularies of motives" blind one from seeing the capital they risk. According to Anderson (2004), the primary difference between Burke and

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2018.04.008>

Received 11 January 2018; Received in revised form 6 April 2018; Accepted 18 April 2018

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Bourdieu is that Burke considered the rhetorical dimensions of motive, while Bourdieu focused on the body “as an active repository of social understanding” (p. 257). Bourdieu theorized how “gestures, techniques, and manners of comportment” structure social reality, perhaps unbeknownst to agents who serve as unwilling “vessels of motives” (pp. 264, 272). At basic, Burke and Bourdieu offered theories of human motivation, each in their own way. Further, both thinkers were preoccupied with problems of theoretical reductionism.

Thus, this paper reads Bourdieu in light of Burke to identify limitations in Bourdieu’s metaphor of capital. I question, “How can Burke’s four master tropes of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony help PR scholars to better understand the limitations intrinsic to Bourdieu’s ‘capital’?” The first section of this paper outlines Bourdieu’s “capital” as it appears in his 1983 essay, “The Forms of Capital.” Next, I move into how Bourdieu has been understood by PR scholars. In the third section of this paper, I review Bourdieu’s forms of capital in light of Burke’s “Four Master Tropes.” Reading Bourdieu through Burke enables PR scholars to better understand the limitations in Bourdieu’s terminology, which lead to debunking, materialist reductionism, and relativism. Finally, I explain how Bourdieu himself euphemizes purpose in terms of capital and conclude with implications for future research.

1. The forms of capital

In his (1983/1986) essay “The Forms of Capital,” Bourdieu was responding to the work of eventual Nobel Prize winner Gary Becker, an economist and sociologist at the University of Chicago. Becker was building upon what he deemed “the human capital ‘revolution’ first initiated by Schultz, Mincer, Friedman, Rosen, and others at the University of Chicago in the early 1960s (Becker, 1964/1993, p. 15). Marx offered a “classical” understanding of capital where capital was the surplus value on a given commodity captured by a capitalist (Lin, 2001, pp. 4–8). According to Becker, however, “The principal characteristic that distinguishes human from other kinds of capital is that, by definition, the former is embedded or *embodied* in the person investing” (Becker, 1964/1993, p. 112; italics mine). For “neo-capitalist” theorists such as Becker and Bourdieu, laborers themselves accrue capital (e.g. embodied capital in the form of education and skills). Bourdieu’s “neo-capitalistic” theory departs from Becker’s on the question of social inertia.

As more or less synonymous with power, capital operates as the “marshall’s baton” that not everyone possesses (Bourdieu, 1983/1986, p. 241). Bourdieu uses the metaphor of capital to explore cultural “inertia,” or how the historical momentum of struggles won and lost in the past carries into the present (pp. 241, 255n1). Each generation inherits particular “immanent regularities of the social world” that came before (p. 241). The sociocultural game one is thrown into has been rigged from the beginning. Bourdieu explains capital in terms that extend beyond ordinarily recognizable economic assets. He defines capital as “accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its ‘incorporated,’ embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor” (p. 241). Because capital stretches into the past, accumulated “social energy” robs individuals of a “miracle” in fortune (p. 241). Prevailing structures of society (economic and otherwise) are perpetuated by the different forms of capital: cultural, social, and symbolic.

Economic capital converts directly into money and is the most basic form of capital (Bourdieu, 1983/1986, p. 243). Cultural capital appears under more subtle guises in institutionalized, objectified, and embodied phenomena. Academic endorsements or professional certifications such as Accreditation in Public Relations (APR) operate as a type of institutionalized cultural capital. A copy of one’s institutionally sanctioned competence gets objectified into tangible artifacts, such as degrees, awards, and certificates. Objectified and institutionalized cultural capital refer to the embodied capital of an individual (pp. 243–248). Because cultural capital becomes embodied in the individual who has acquired it, nobody can acquire cultural capital for someone else. As Bourdieu states, “Like the acquisition of a muscular physique or a suntan, it [the accumulation of cultural capital] cannot be done at second hand. . .” (p. 244). An individual incorporates and carries around embodied cultural capital in themselves. Bourdieu writes, “It [embodied cultural capital] dies with its bearer” (p. 245). Thus, the legitimacy of one’s embodied cultural capital relies upon institutionally sanctioned, objective referents.

Lin (2001) explains Bourdieu’s social capital as “*investment in social relations with expected returns in the marketplace*” (p. 19). Social capital functions as a pooled resource, a collective asset or shared credential. Pins, badges, or business cards might signify social capital. Bourdieu writes, “Manners (bearing, pronunciation, etc.) may be included in social capital insofar as, through the mode of acquisition they point to, they indicate initial membership of a more or less prestigious group” (Bourdieu, 1983/1986, p. 256n13). To build social capital, one networks with others embodying similar types of capital (p. 249). Social capital decreases in value if an undesirable individual joins the larger network of social relations (p. 250). Protecting against depreciation of a group’s social capital might thereby require shunning pariahs. Despite possessing other forms of capital, pariahs lacking social capital do not benefit from the “multiplier” effect that social capital has on the other forms of capital (p. 249).

In his essay “The Forms of Capital,” Bourdieu discusses social and cultural capital more than symbolic capital, although he does explain symbolic capital in a footnote (Bourdieu, 1983/1986, p. 255n3). Symbolic capital signifies legitimate competence, while obscuring the historical and economic realities that gave rise to the symbolic capital in the first place. Symbolic capital is “unrecognized as capital and recognized as legitimate competence” (p. 245). Bourdieu might suggest that symbolic capital rears its head in PR when a PR practitioner presumes arbitrary competence over public relations without realizing their stake in perpetuating existing social structures. For Bourdieu, there would be no such thing as actual PR competence. Instead, certain practices may appear legitimate, but actually mask particular economic interests. At this point, Bourdieu’s historicism shows through, since socioeconomic factors at any given historical moment determine the value of any form of capital (Bourdieu, 1983/1986, p. 255n3; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 139; cf. Wacquant, 1992, p. 47). Indeed, misrecognizing legitimate competence perpetuates a particular “game” with arbitrary rules that individuals must abide by in order to survive (Bourdieu, 1983/1986, p. 255n3).

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