



Social aspects of career choice from the perspective of habitus theory[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The concept of habitus designates a cognitive structure that is socially embedded and can give valuable insight into the social influences on career choice. A study investigating the relationship of habitus to career choice is presented in a sample of Icelandic youth aged 19–22 ($N = 476$). Measures of habitus were developed on the basis of reported cultural and leisure activities. The analysis of leisure and cultural items progressed in two steps: factor analysis and cluster analysis. The clusters constitute the four different habitus groups: Pop and fashion, Sports and rock, Music, and Literature. Correspondence factor analysis showed that the habitus groups (clusters) were related to other social variables, such as gender and class; validating habitus theory. Additionally, habitus measures were strongly linked to career variables, such as occupational perception and preferred future occupation. The results support previous research in showing that habitus theory is relevant to career counseling theory and can be a basis of understanding the relationship between social structure and career choice.

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1. Introduction

Choice and choosing are central phenomena in vocational guidance and career education theories, especially the personal aspects of choosing. However, research and common experience teach us that both personal and social variables influence career choice with social variables weighing more than personal ones (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Lent & Brown, 1996; Roberts, 1995, 1997; Super & Bachrach, 1957). Although researchers have emphasized the psychological aspects of careers many theoreticians have claimed that the social forces that affect careers need to be put in focus (Blustein, 2006; Gottfredson, 1981; Ivey, 1980).

Career intervention theory applies both to the individual and the world of work. Theories are needed that examine both sides of the person–environment–fit equation. In this regard the habitus theory of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is of particular interest. Choices and tastes in everyday life are pivotal aspects of the theory integrating both social and psychological influences on choice at the same time as it challenges conventional ideas of choice and choosing. Indeed, Bourdieu frequently criticized rational choice theory (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), and saw a strong relationship between the social way of being and choice. The central idea behind habitus theory is a correspondence between social structures and cognitive structures of individuals (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Guichard & Cassar, 1998). This theory therefore highlights interesting aspects of the social aspect of choosing.

Although the weight of social variables in career choice is a well-known fact, it remains to be explained how, on the personal level, individuals choose occupations very close to their social milieu. The article seeks answers to this question. It presents a

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study based on habitus theory and its relationship to future occupational choices. The results show the advantage of using this theory in career research.

In his work, Bourdieu studied intensively the social systems that people encounter in their careers from an early age, their position in the power structure, and how people perceive these systems (i.e. how social experience structures people's outlook, choices and position within social spaces). Bourdieu is often accused of being deterministic; in fact he postulates that human liberty is not attained by overcoming determinisms, and certainly not by ignoring them, but by knowing of their existence and how they operate (Bourdieu, 1997, 1998). One of his goals was to provide people (most often those who are in a dominated or underprivileged position in society) with tools that allow them a better understanding of their position in society (Bourdieu, 1997). Indeed it is important for school and career counselors to be able to share such tools with their clients.

As a critic of both traditional philosophy and classical sociology, Bourdieu rejected dualistic thought and considered the separation between individual and society extremely unhelpful. Bourdieu's theory concentrates on the individual in relation to social space and therefore the idea of an individual apart from society is unacceptable. This rejection of the duality of individual and society is the basis of his criticism of rational choice theory. Instead of regarding choice as being rational in nature Bourdieu sees choice as being both individual and social in origin and he uses the habitus concept to overcome this separation between individual and society. Choices are based on historically created structures of preferences constituted in a complex interaction between practices and the reproduction of these same practices. These structures constitute the habitus.

The concept of habitus was used by the Scholastics, Durkheim and Mauss although these authors did not give it "a decisive role to play" (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 86). Bourdieu says that he revived that word because it is close to the idea of habit but in addition to being acquired it designates a habit that has become a permanent disposition and way of thinking (Bourdieu, 1993).

1.1. *Habitus*

The main conceptual tools of *habitus*, *field* and *capital* are particularly important in Bourdieu's writings on choice and taste. Habitus, in particular, is a key concept in Bourdieu's theorization of choice. Bourdieu defines habitus as a "social subjectivity"; the thinking of actors or individuals is structured according to the structure of their social surroundings (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). It is therefore a cognitive structure that is socially embedded. Bourdieu also defines habitus as a "structuring structure" and thereby offers a synthesis of phenomenology and structuralism. Habitus is a structuralist concept because it is a defined set of mental relations which can be formalized as a structure. But it is also a phenomenological (or constructivist) concept because it structures the way individuals organize their perception of the world and their behavior in it (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Habitus generates strategies, but at the same time gives room for individual improvisation. Individuals select actions from a range of possible strategies and it is their social history that enables them to perceive these strategies (Mansfield, 2000).

In their everyday choices, as well as in more important ones such as career choice, individuals distinguish themselves in their dispositions and practices from other groups in social space who have different habituses. People differentiate themselves from others on the basis of knowledge, tasks and interests in for example arts and education (Mansfield, 2000). One of Bourdieu's best-known sociological studies is published in his book *Distinction* (1984). The title refers to this social phenomenon that distinguishes people socially on the basis of their different choices or tastes in music, books, clothes, beverages, and other items of cultural consumption. The habitus both produces classifications of distinctive signs (taste and life styles) within social space and ways of appreciating and recognizing these classifications. Life styles derive from habitus and are qualified as systems of social signs, such as 'vulgar' or 'distinguished', i.e. someone who listens to rap music might be perceived as having a vulgar taste in music and at the same time someone who listens regularly to classical music might be perceived as having a distinguished taste (Bourdieu, 1984).

The habitus concept describes how collective experience is embodied in individuals in categories of perception and appreciation. It is measured by analyzing binary oppositions present in the judgment people make on their environment. The binary oppositions are defined as being discriminating mental operations that are rational, but unconscious. As such they are the building blocks of the collective code that make up a culture and are fundamental in all our thinking (Badcock, 1975). According to Bourdieu (1984) the schemes of classification and categories of perception are constituted in a socially pertinent way in opposite pairs such as Volvo (refined car brand at that time) versus 2CV (the typical cheap car at that time), red wine versus champagne or golf versus football. Differences in judgment of taste can oppose people in social space. Those who drink champagne are opposite those who drink whisky and also opposite those who drink red wine and are much more likely to have antique furniture and play golf. These properties function as distinguished signs, negative or positive, for those who have the categories to perceive them (Bourdieu, 1987). Bourdieu's (1984) study on taste is based on this method of analyzing habitus. It is centered on a classification of cultural consumption, which he analyzes with correspondence factor analysis; a method he used to analyze habitus structures as relationships of social oppositions.

1.2. *Field and capital*

The work of Bourdieu is a comprehensive theory of human practice, and looks at action such as choices as both embodied and institutionalized (Wacquant, 2012). If the embodied aspect of human action is seen in habitus, the concepts of capital and field designate the institutionalized aspect of historical action. According to Bourdieu social space separates into different fields, where different rules apply, for example the field of theater or philosophy. Each field has a given set of "unspoken rules for what can be validly uttered or perceived within it" (Eagleton, 1991, p. 157).

One of the best-known theoretical constructs of Bourdieu's theory is cultural capital. Resources are distributed via capital, not only economic, but also social, symbolic and cultural. Similar to economical capital, cultural capital is unequally distributed and

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