

MOBILIZING BOURDIEU'S THEORY IN ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH

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Abstract: Pierre Bourdieu, French ethnologist and sociologist (1930-2002), is one of the major thinkers of the twentieth century. The novelty of his approach and the diversity of empirical objects of his research have attracted a large number of studies and research that introduce and discuss its contribution to the knowledge of social reality. By offering concepts such as habitus, field and capital, he built a different vision of social reality. Despite his many influential writings, a literature search in the three Academy of Management journals generates only very few citations of his works, indicating that introducing his three key texts, listed above, could help remedy the limited attention to his works from the mainstream of organization and management studies. In this paper, we aim to present an overview of selected parts of Bourdieu's work for explaining how the business and management literature may benefit from a deeper engagement with his contributions.

Keywords: organizational research, field, capital, habitus.

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Pierre Bourdieu, French ethnologist and sociologist (1930-2002), is one of the major thinkers of the twentieth century. The novelty of his approach and the diversity of empirical objects of his research have attracted a large number of studies and research that introduce and discuss its contribution to the knowledge of social reality. By offering concepts such as habitus, field and capital, he built a different vision of social reality. Despite his many influential writings, a literature search in the three Academy of Management journals generates only very few citations of his works, indicating that introducing his three key texts, listed above, could

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help remedy the limited attention to his works from the mainstream of organization and management studies. In this paper, we aim to present an overview of selected parts of Bourdieu's work for explaining how the business and management literature may benefit from a deeper engagement with his contributions.

1. Conceptual framework

Bourdieu's main contribution to social science has been his "theory of practice and the three concepts field, capital and habitus.

1.1. Field

Microcosm in the macrocosm which constitutes social space (Lahire, 2001), the field is a relatively autonomous social universe set with its own laws, rules and challenges (Bourdieu, 1989). Fields, according to Bourdieu, are "networks of social relations, structured systems of social positions within which struggles take place over resources, stakes and access" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu 1994; 2002). Fields can be thought of as a social space or network of relationship between positions occupied by actors (Ihlen, 2007). Bourdieu uses the concept of field to theorize society as a space of relative social positions (Bourdieu, 1998). In a field, actors struggle to maintain or improve their positions vis-à-vis other players. The structure of the field reveals "the state of the forces between agents or institutions engaged in struggle" to dominate the field (Bourdieu, 1994). Consequently, in each field, the agents are characterized by the possession of a particular combination of properties which function like a capital (Everett, 2002). The different positions are structured and anchored in forms of unequally shared power or capital. Conflict and competition characterize the relationships between the actors as they try to accumulate, conserve, or convert different types of capital. The positions are ones of dominance, subordination or equivalence (homology) according to the types and amounts of capital possessed by an actor (Everett, 2002).

1.2. Capital

Capital, according to Bourdieu, may have different forms or "species". The most obvious being the economic one. Economic capital consists on

monetary and material wealth, commodities, and physical resources (money, property).

The second form of capital is the cultural one. It is the intellectual qualifications produced by the school system and the family (Bonnwitz, 1997). It can be in a built-in state (culture, language, knowledge of the code social), objectified (books, dictionaries, works of art, etc), or institutionalized (titles, educational qualifications) (Bourdieu, 1979).

The third form is the social capital. It is the whole of the contacts, networks and social relations which the individual can have. However, these various forms of capital can be converted into symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) which comes from prestige and honor that confer on an agent the possession and the recognition of other forms of capital (Ihlen, 2005).

1.3. Habitus

The notion of habitus plays a central role in the theory of Pierre Bourdieu. This word has a Latin origin (Accardo, 1997). Bourdieu defines habitus as the system of durable dispositions, an internalized mental or cognitive structure that functions both consciously and unconsciously, and is constraining in its suggestion of what people should and should not do (Bourdieu, 1990).

Habitus is embodied or deposited within individual social actors. It is a structuring mechanism that generates strategies for actors in the social world and through which actors relate to the social world. Thus, habitus refers to the orientation of actors in a field. It denotes the perceptual and evaluative schemata and the dispositions for acting that are internalized in people's minds and bodies (Everett, 2002). Habitus is based on all of the situations through which dispositions are created and that an individual experiences throughout a lifetime (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Habitus exists in the form of mental and corporeal schemata, a matrix of perception, appreciation, and action (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Then, it will function like unconscious principles of action, perception and reflection (Mounier, 2001).

In short, habitus is culture, and like culture, it pervades or saturates social processes (Foster, 1986). It produces society, but is at the same time produced by society. It is open for modification and "constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either

reinforces or modifies its structures: “It is durable but not eternal” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

2. Mobilization of Bourdieu’s theory in organizational analysis

2.1. Organizations as a field within the fields

The social world is seen as being made up of several fields that are more or less autonomous, but subsumed under the overarching field of power. At the organizational level, organization is a "black box" (Bourdieu, 2000) which is located in a particular field in a hierarchical structure and giving the individual agents or groups who occupy different roles and status (Accardo, 1997). According to Bourdieu, a field has no parts, but it has sub fields each with its own logic, rules and regularities. For example, a research centre can be said to belong to the scientific field, a parent–teacher association to the educational field, a bank to the economic field, a theatre to the cultural field, a ministry to the bureaucratic field, and so on. A typical trait of such fields is that they put a higher value on one type of capital than on others, and that this capital might be worth less in another field. In the field of business, economic capital is prioritized, but this has less value in the academic field. In the latter, scholarly significance and rating by one’s peers is usually what counts (Ihlen, 2007).

An organization may select a field from the industry (telecommunications field, field of food industry...) and develop its own autonomy without being completely independent of the field (Drummond, 1998). Similarly, a division within the company may select a field with common properties with it, but also having its own autonomy (Moingeon & Ramanantsoa, 1997). The organization is more or less autonomous in its own field, and has more or less power in its sector. His own story is part of the history of his industry and the wider economy that shaped it (Gomez, 2006).

Each field or subfield has a specific internal logic: rules, issues, forms of capital valued and change over time (Moingeon & Ramanantsoa, 1995) and which are mechanisms for structuring and regularization of power relations (Oakes et al., 1998). Therefore, this device seems particularly suited to understanding the practices of different actors within the organizational field. Indeed, the actors fall within the lines as in a play area,

will develop strategies to accumulate capital that allows them to have power and have a dominant position (Bourdieu & Saint-Martin, 1978, p. 56). What can be done either by improving their own position in the current structure of the field organization, or by improving the situation of the company in its competitive environment (Gomez, 2006).

Struggles taking place within the company are related to the concern of stakeholders to promote the activities to which they relate and maintain or improve their positions by perpetuating or transforming the balance between the duties to which their interests are attached (Bourdieu, 2000). However, agents in dominant position can also ensure their position by seeking stability and continuity or inertia in the structure of the organization. Moreover, individuals operating at various levels of the organization will develop their own logic, rules and regularities that, while they must be consistent throughout the company, reflect the scope of their specialty. They then play the game their way, but so constrained by the scope of the business and develop strategies and appropriation of the game (Drummond, 1998). Similarly, and as a field, the organization has an influence on the players and imposes a number of rules they must comply risk being banned from the game (Moingeon & Ramanantsoa, 1995).

Ultimately, we can say that the notion of field allows the clarification of relationships that organizations have with their immediate environment and also a better understanding of their inner workings. Moreover, the analysis in terms of field suggests the interlocking of different spaces. It is a powerful tool for thinking about complex relationships that develop between agents and how relationships are partly predetermined by larger areas that include them. The field concept leads to emphasize aspects of the structuring of the social world that can be usefully transferred to the organizational analysis (Lafaye, 1996).

2.2. Capital in the organization

Like the concept of field, the concept of capital has enjoyed widespread use in organization theory. In fact, capital would better flesh out the explanation of the positions held actors in the field of business. We include among others, the economic capital that represents the portion of shares owned and the income of actors. As for cultural capital, it depends on the knowledge, skills, science and technology (guarantees, among others, diplomas and titles of major scientific schools). Finally, social capital is

ensured by the name, family relationships, school, office, and it is acquired, among other things, the possible shift in senior bureaucratic. In addition Bourdieu has identified other forms of capital related specifically to the organizational field. These include the bureaucratic capital tied the position in the hierarchy and seniority in the company, and information capital which can range from technical or commercial knowledge, to knowledge of the past of the company and its individual members (Bourdieu, 2000). By interacting with others, these different forms of capital will structure the scope of the company and will influence the positions. Nevertheless, the emphasis on one or the other form of capital varies from one industry to another, but also from one company to another and changes over time. These privileged forms of capital, at some point, are the subject of struggles agents through their practice and allow us to understand the underlying logic. Indeed, the protagonists are trying to match their specific interests with those of the company and they have capital appreciation in its different forms and in its various states to maintain or improve their positions within the field of the company (Bourdieu, 2000). For example, managers' priorities may result, at some point, from the hierarchy of forms of capital relevant to exercise power in the company (Bourdieu & Saint-Martin, 1978). Therefore, the positions that they occupy in the organizational field will depend on their ability to assert their interests (Bourdieu, 2000).

Thus, analysis of the organizational field as a function of different forms of capital reveals incessant power struggles between agents. Indeed, the specifics of an organization do not reside only in its shared values but also in its struggles and conflicts. Certainly the conflict dimension was found in other studies, like those of Crozier and Friedberg (1977). But they do not evoke the shared values and common objectives in these conflicts. To this end, the contribution of Bourdieu to this level is that it revealed that beyond the struggles, there is a "prior agreement between the agents on what's worth fighting" (Bourdieu, 1984). This is what he calls the "objective complicity". In other words, what are the fundamental interests related to the existence of the field, and in the absence of this bond the field would cease to exist (Moingeon & Ramanantsoa, 1997). For example, for the company, one of the challenges is to occupy a position of power and there constant conflict for positions, but beyond these struggles, there is a prior agreement that this company must be always beneficial.

2.3. Habitus in organization: What influences?

While field and capital are familiar concepts in organizational research, the third concept in Bourdieu's triad – habitus – has been applied to the study of organizations only a handful of times (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008). The concept of the habitus completes Bourdieu's theoretical triad and makes a truly unified and relational sociology of organizations possible. By the notion of habitus Bourdieu helps to highlight the limitations of the model used by proponents of the theory of rational action, noting that besides rational calculation, there are other principles and practices that generate often it is the habitus of agents that encourages players to adopt a particular strategy (Moingeon & Ramanantsoa, 1995). Indeed, habitus helps explain some choice indecision (Vaughan, 2008); it can also lead an agent to adopt a strategy suited to the needs of the field without it, provided the product is a conscious and rational calculation. Habitus operates as well as a guidance system (Drummond, 1998) producing strategies, "although they are not the product of a conscious referred explicitly asked for (...) are objectively adjusted to the situation" (Bourdieu, 1987, p.21). This matrix of perception, appreciation and action, the habitus, structure patterns of identity of individuals and determines their managerial practices and their role system (Pailot, 1995). Habitus thus functions as a true internal compass that guides staff in the various subfields of the company, indicating the direction and giving a certain unity to their behaviours (Moingeon, 1995).

Emirbayer and Johnson (2008) speak about "organizational habitus" which is set up by an unconscious learning and incorporation of field values and rules of the game (Moingeon & Ramanantsoa, 1997).

Within organization, the habitus of the agent will be in a dynamic relationship with "the habitus of the organization" and its shares will be embedded in it. Habitus thus reflects the categories of judgment and perception in the organizational field: the beliefs, roles and institutionalized rules which constitute a shared cognitive system. Habitus is also the analytic bond that links between the individual behaviour and social structure (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008). In fact, habitus is both personal and social. It is personal because it is acquired, structured and restructured through experience. It is social, because it is highly linked to the context of the field and the position of the agent inside this field (Golsorkhi & Huault, 2006).

3. Conclusion

In mapping the contours of a Bourdieu-based approach, we have acknowledged the ubiquity and the proven utility of the theory of Pierre

Bourdieu in organizational research. In fact, Bourdieu's work could be the basis of the revival of many readings in management. It allows the articulation of levels of analysis, which is one of the difficulties in traditional organizational theory. It also allows repositioning of the agent within the organizational context (Golsorkhi & Huault, 2006) by exceeding the dichotomy between cognition and behaviour that prevent the understanding of organizational behaviour (Everett, 2002). However, the value of the work of Bourdieu is not just the link it establishes between the social and global, but also concerns the notion of power which he said is a relational process. In other words, the organization is rooted in a "field of relations" (Drummond, 1998) and positions of actors are inter-related (Ihlen, 2005).

Moreover, taking into account the concept of habitus has allowed us to better understand the behaviour and decisions of individuals who are not always the product of rational calculation but are also determined by the device field-habitus-capital.

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