

## **Capturing habitus: theory, method and reflexivity**

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Bourdieu's career long endeavour was to devise both theoretical and methodological tools that could apprehend and explain the social world and its mechanisms of cultural (re)production and related forms of domination. Amongst the several key concepts developed by Bourdieu, habitus has gained prominence as both a research lens and a research instrument useful to enter individuals' trajectories and 'histories' of practices. While much attention has been paid to the theoretical significance of habitus, less emphasis has been placed on its methodological implications. This paper explores the application of the concept of habitus as both theory and method across two sub-fields of educational research: graduate employment and digital scholarship practices. The findings of this reflexive testing of habitus suggest that bridging the theory-method comes with its own set of challenges for the researcher; challenges which reveal the importance of taking the work of application seriously in research settings.

**Keywords:** Application, Bourdieu, habitus, reflexivity, theory-method

## **Introduction**

According to Smith (2012), one of the key functions of social theory is to provide a framework for undertaking empirical social research. It does this by ‘equipping the researcher with a vocabulary for describing social phenomena, together with a related set of assumptions about how to go about explaining them’ (p. 87). Smith was writing about theory and method in relation to the work of Axel Honneth, who, while gaining prominence in applied fields, has not been as influential as Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu’s work has provided something of a template for social theory as a conceptual vocabulary in applied research settings, with forms of capital acquiring visibility both in research literature and popular press. On a par with Bourdieu’s treatment of capitals, habitus has now acquired currency in the Anglophone world and further afield, as it has been applied to different research areas, a range that continues to broaden at pace.

Habitus, alongside other Bourdieuan tools, offers an explanatory framework and theoretical vocabulary for processes of social reproduction and transformation. Following Bourdieu’s legacy, the conceptualisation and application of habitus in different settings comprises attempts to overcome the dichotomy between structure and agency whilst acknowledging the external and historical factors that condition, constrain and/or promote change. Many researchers are attracted to habitus as a framework because it offers an alternative to overly-agentic or structural accounts of social phenomena. It also speaks to the lived experiences of researchers who are eager to examine the everyday relational modes of being that offer insights into the often invisible workings of power and privilege.

The growing popularity of habitus as a conceptual tool has generated much debate, the focus of which has centred on its relationship to change. Whether or not habitus is deterministic

or transformative has created a division of opinion and approach between proponents of either conceptualization (see Jenkins, 1982, and Yang, 2014 for examples). These discussions however have been mainly focused on the theoretical worth of Bourdieuan concepts, thus leaving less space for considerations regarding its application in field work via research methods. Yet, these concepts were not meant to be used solely as theory, but rather as theory-method as a form of preparing the research for field work.

In this regard, Bourdieu's key concepts, as for example habitus, have been discussed more often in relation to theorisations of research findings than to methodological choices and fieldwork applications, thus making the discussions around Bourdieu's contribution to method far less pronounced. This is most likely because such debates are scarcer in the literature. Nonetheless, they were an ever-present concern in Bourdieu's work (see, for example, Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). This imbalance regarding the use of Bourdieuan concepts as theory separated from method is something of a concern, given that Bourdieu's conceptual apparatus was an attempt to reconcile practice and theory through method, with his key concepts working in the background to unearth and understand the essence of contextualised practices (Costa & Murphy, 2015). In short, putting Bourdieu's theoretical concepts to work as part of methodological decisions and development of data collection instruments is still regarded by many – especially those new to research – as a 'black-box' of social inquiry. This is something we aim to (re)explore in this paper, using the application of habitus as an example of theory-method dialectics.

The purpose of this paper is thus to help rectify this imbalance between theory and method by bringing together research studies on habitus in two educational related contexts – graduate employment and digital scholarship practices – and examining in detail the ways in which the research in question has endeavoured to 'capture' habitus in those two settings. In

particular, the paper indicates that capturing habitus is not a straightforward enterprise, given that it is as much influenced by the context within which the capturing occurs as it is by the way the theoretical apparatus is framed. It also suggests that the actual process of *application* itself should be paid more attention to in discussions over theory and method, the bridging mechanism too often sidelined as a secondary feature of social research.

This take on application is important, not just for studies of habitus but also for the wide range of studies that endeavour to apply social theory in empirical work. These share a common concern, regardless of concept, when it comes to bridging a not-insubstantial gap between theory and method. What emerges from this endeavour – by bringing theory to life through the process of application, while also unpacking the mechanisms via which theory and method converge – is a set of challenges for researchers who wish to bridge the theory-method gap via the socio-theoretical vocabulary of concepts such as habitus. In other words, this paper explores the use of Bourdieu's key concept of habitus from a methodological perspective which makes it a rather distinctive and relevant project.

### **Habitus: Theory *and* method**

For Bourdieu, habitus is more than theory; it is an essential instrument for tracing social practices:

The notion of habitus has several virtues. ... agents have a history and are the product of an individual history and an education associated with a milieu, and ... also a product of a collective history ... (Bourdieu & Chartier, 2015, p.52)

But what is habitus? Habitus encapsulates social action through dispositions and can be broadly explained as the evolving process through which individuals act, think, perceive and approach the world and their role in it. Habitus, thus, denotes a way of being. As assimilated past without a clear consciousness, habitus is an internal archive of personal experiences rooted in the distinct aspects of individuals' social journeys. Individuals' dispositions are a reflection of their lived trajectories and justify their approaches to practice (Bourdieu, 1990).

That said, uncovering habitus is not a straightforward task; the challenges arise on multiple fronts. For a start, they lie in the operationalisation of the theoretical concept of habitus - i.e, in capturing this fluid, broad concept - with specific methodological tools. Nonetheless, one aspect that researchers tend to agree on is that sets of dispositions, however defined, are a useful gateway to habitus and its effects. This is understandable and to be expected. What is more interesting is how researchers define these dispositions, in accordance with their research questions, and the methods they employ to capture them (See Costa & Murphy, 2015).

Another key issue from the literature relates to the diversity of research methods used to capture habitus, with evidence suggesting considerable divergence in approaches. This suggests that there is not one single method that should be applied to this subject, but as many and diverse as 'demanded' by the research phenomena explored. For example, Stahl (2015) utilises narrative inquiry to grapple with white working-class habitus, while Bodovski's (2015) work on parental and adolescent habitus employs an analysis of secondary survey data to flesh out conceptions of habitus.

What can also be identified in previous research is the diversity of dispositions under investigation, which suggests that, when it comes to application, it is not as simple as saying habitus can be captured by studying dispositions. Aside from clarifying what is meant by 'disposition', the researcher must make choices about which dispositions are relevant to the

study at hand. This is a significant question, as, even when similar methods are used, there is no guarantee that the same dispositions will come to the surface. This is evident in research on somewhat comparable social groups. Take Stahl's (2015) and France's (2015) research on working class boys as an example. They uncover a concern with 'loyalty to self' and 'averageness', and 'fighting' and 'stealing' respectively. What is interesting here is that the researchers were looking for dispositions with very different research questions in mind – the former concerned with aspirations, the latter focused on the context of criminality. This does not mean that one approach is more appropriate than the other; what it suggests is that method should fit the purpose of the investigation. It also indicates that the questions asked have major implications for the answers provided. This role for interpretation is a key component in the art of application of habitus and illustrates that the complex lives of research participants, who can embody multiple, often conflicting sets of dispositions, should not be taken at face value. In other words, one isolated set of dispositions does not make a habitus. It is therefore important to highlight here that research methods are more than the types or instruments of data collection, they also encompass the process through which the researcher approaches and conceives the research phenomenon under focus.

The complexity of defining and applying habitus provides much food for thought when it comes to the theory-method relationship. This is further enhanced by Bourdieu's obsession with reflexivity, which encourages critical understandings of social realities in both the researcher and the researched. Reflexivity, however, extends beyond concepts of self-reference and self-awareness to deal with the systematic exploration of the 'unthought categories of thought which delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 40), i.e., one's subjectivity. The authors' approach in this paper is an example of reflexivity come to life and a testing and re-testing of a concept and its efficacy across fields,

further strengthening its explanatory potential. This is an approach that we think Bourdieu would have appreciated. That said, it is not the purpose of this paper to provide the final word on habitus and its place in social research. The objective of placing such research projects side by side is, rather, to foster further dialogue about the relationship between concepts such as habitus and methodologies employed in diverse settings.

What follows is a description and analysis of the application of habitus in two different studies and a reflexive discussion of what these studies mean in relation to the theory-method relationship. The continuing presence of habitus in these two areas is particularly important when we consider theories of practice that conflict with Bourdieu, such as Margaret Archer's *morphogenesis* model (1996). In a similar vein to the late modern arguments from Beck (and Beck-Gernsheim) and Bauman, Archer (2013) charts the emergence of a morphogenetic society beginning in the 1980s and continuing until current day, such a society is characterised by fluid identities, opportunities for rapid change and the de-structuring of "traditional" inequalities mediated by increasingly individual/autonomous levels of reflexivity via internal conversations. In the context of this model, the habitus is an anachronistic tool unable to account for a society 'too fluid to be consolidated into correlated dispositions, which are inherited and shared by those similarly positioned' (Archer, 2007, p.38). Two key institutions/platforms in the development of the increasingly fluid society are higher education (Archer, 2007) and the Internet (Porpora, 2013). However, the classed/collective nature of digital dispositions and attitudes and practices of graduates demonstrated through our case studies question the role of these institutions/platforms. We advocate that the flexibility within Bourdieu's model (Adams, 2006; Reay, 2004; Emmerich, 2013; Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Atkinson, 2016) and the heuristic principle behind the habitus (Hodkinson, 1998) provides us with a sharper set of thinking tools in which to interrogate the social world. Indeed, both case

studies highlight the theoretical implications for Bourdieu and, as such, can act as a testbed for the challenges of methodological application.

### **Case Study 1: The habitus and graduate employment**

This case study provides both the practical setting and the opportunity to reflect on the effectiveness to ‘capture’ habitus in issues concerning graduate employment. The expansion of higher education in the UK, credited to both the *Robbins Report* (1963) and *Higher Education: A New Framework* (DfE, 1991), has brought with it an increase in the level of participation – rising from 6 per cent in the 1960s (Brooks & Everett, 2009) to 47 per cent in 2012 (Heath, *et al.*, 2013). A major consequence for graduate employment was that the expansion of UK higher education flooded the market with graduates at a speed and volume incompatible with the requirement of the graduate employment market. Figures on graduate underemployment point to 40 per cent (Purcell, *et al.*, 2013) and 47 per cent (ONS, 2013) of graduates unable to find graduate employment. There are two key issues facing recent and future graduates: the role of *a priori* capitals and the ‘fuzzy’ nature of the labour market. As the number of university graduates rises in a disproportionate level to graduate employment opportunities, the value of the degree – of scholastic capital – decreases. As such, *a priori* capitals, which Bourdieu and Boltanski (1978) argue tend to be associated with social class such as cultural and economic capital, play a leading role in a graduate’s ability to enter the labour market. This is compounded by an increasingly destructured and confusing labour market, one that Bourdieu and Boltanski (1981) term ‘fuzzy’, requiring a mastery of the market’s tacit requirements and appreciation of its constantly changing needs. Contrary to the meritocratic discourse which has framed a significant portion of U.K. social policy and the rationale behind various changes in



fee structure, a significant variable in deciding which graduates get these jobs is class (Bourdieu & Boltanski, 1981; Brown & Hesketh, 2004).

In light of these statistics and their critical interpretation, the research under review here asked: are strategies of graduate employment influenced by the habitus of a young person? The research focused on the life histories of 27 respondents. All members of the study had graduated from either a pre-1992 university (*Southern*) or a post-1992 university (*Northern*), had read for a non-vocational degree and had graduated between two and ten years before the data collection. In terms of the findings from this study, there was a general binary classed model of experiences and pathways of graduate employment. There were classed contrasts in dispositions including appreciating the devaluation of a university degree, confidence in their ability to find a 'graduate level' job and attitudes to a flexible graduate labour market. These contrasts were articulated through and accounted for by habitus. Some of the clearest illustrations of the role of habitus on dispositions did not come from comparing classed groups but when observing the reformulation of an individual respondent's habitus and the subsequent shift both in attitude and practice. The 'out-of-environment' conception of experiences used here (Burke, 2015a, 2015b) builds on Bourdieu's (1992) assertion that, while the habitus is quite durable, a large enough shift in environment can lead to an altered habitus. In this case, a small number of working class respondents, upon graduating from university, interacted with individuals or environments that radically changed their understanding of the game and their levels of confidence/expectations – in other words, their dispositions. Importantly, the divergent pathways these graduates were now on were not directed from a primary habitus but, rather, from a reformulated habitus, as the new ways the graduates approached the labour market stayed quite close to the instructions/advice provided in their out-of-environment experiences.

### **Capturing the habitus: the role of biographical research**

The approach to habitus used in this case study was directed by a specific theoretical interpretation of Bourdieu, where habitus is understood as being both a durable structure but also malleable: open to alternative paths through agency and change in circumstance and environment. Habitus, understood this way, is quite applicable to graduate employment research. The de-structured and chaotic graduate labour market requires a strong ability to play the game and dispositions congruent to that labour market – two facets of habitus. While it is an interesting academic exercise for the habitus to be theorised, it needs to be operationalised and applied through a form of data collection. As argued elsewhere (see Burke, 2015a, 2015b), the durability of habitus in both its dispositions and forms of practice provides an opportunity to empirically observe its directive influence. To be specific, the habitus can be observed through the repetition of both attitudes and practices (Bourdieu, 1987).

In this case study, the Biographical Narrative Interview Method (BNIM) was used to capture habitus. Traditionally, the BNIM is associated with grounded theory and an inductive approach to data collection (Miller, 2000; Rosenthal, 2005). However, we argue that it is equally applicable in a theoretically driven project and provides a clear opportunity to chart a life history and tally particular dispositions and norms, while measuring an individual's ability to 'play the game' based on their understanding of the game and the end result. While a reasonable critique against any rigid form of data collection is that it will snap when faced with the practicalities of data collection, it is the set of prescriptive rules at the core of the BNIM which provides its potential. The interview is typically conducted over two sittings and comprises of three parts, or sub-sessions:

- Sub-session 1: The interviewer poses a very open question or statement: ‘tell me about your life’. The respondent is allowed to talk for as long as they wish, and, importantly, the interviewer is not permitted to interject or direct this initial narration.
- Sub-session 2: This portion is usually conducted in the same sitting as sub-session 1, and the interviewer can ask for greater clarification on topics which have been discussed.
- Sub-session 3: This portion happens at a later date once the first two sub-session interviews have been transcribed and analysed. This interview can take a number of forms, as there are no technical constraints imposed on the interviewer.

The BNIM allows us to return to Bourdieu’s own instructions that, to empirically appreciate the habitus, we should look for repetition of attitudes and practices (Bourdieu, 1987). Through the three-stage interview process, it was possible to observe and measure certain attitudes and dispositions, such as confidence in one’s ability or hesitancy toward entering higher education. This observation permitted the researcher to demarcate different groups of respondents by their dispositions. The longitudinal aspect of life history research gave further support to this demarcation, as respondents’ attitudes manifested over a significant period of time with respondents displaying similar levels of comfort/anxiety toward graduate employment as they did to higher education. Equally, the longitudinal focus provided an opportunity to compare different periods of respondents’ life histories. Repetition of practice and sources of habitus reformulation can also be observed and tracked through the BNIM. The strategies respondents employed, i.e., their ability to play the game, in relation to significant life events, such as educational trajectories and graduate employment pathways, could also be measured and associated with different groups. The distinction in attitudes and practices provided a classed

binary model of graduate employment, illustrating their respective habitus. The BNIM demonstrated the durable effects of habitus on the majority of respondents. In particular, it provided a durable undercurrent of its influence despite contradictory gaps in a respondent's trajectory, such as a middle class respondent's inability to secure a graduate position. In other words, it provided an understanding of the bigger picture rather than falling prey to the shortcomings of a pinpointed interview/survey. This application of the BNIM, points to the future opportunities for research to maintain the ethnographic level data required to observe the habitus but in a practical approach which would be open to a larger proportion of researchers. Crucially, the BNIM allows a researcher to formulate a theoretically-informed research question but also requires that research not only reflect on its findings but prohibits theory from having an overtly – and, ultimately, detrimental – directive role in the data collection process. It provides the right 'lab conditions' to observe and measure attitudes and practices over a significant period of time in order to capture habitus.

As with any method, there are practical shortcomings and issues which must be addressed. The BNIM is often required to apologise for its failings stemming from quantitative research's strengths such as reliability and validity. The ethnographic and longitudinal features of the BNIM are open to the charge that, unlike many ethnographies, the BNIM interview can suffer from *a posteriori* biographical re-construction. The issue of a respondent's desire for the presentation of self is one that most qualitative research faces, however more so for the BNIM (see Rosenthal, 2003, 2005; Schütze, 2008, 1992). This charge is based on an assumption of quite strong levels of reflexivity, synonymous with Archer's (2007) *internal conversations* and in contradiction to the (at least semi-) pre-reflexive nature of the habitus. While this form of interview provides a longitudinal account of an individual's life (Burke, 2015a; 2015b), the interview transcript is very unlikely to offer a linear account of an individual's life the way a

traditional longitudinal study would be expected to offer. Contrarily, respondents often revisit periods of their lives throughout the sub-sessions of the interview. It is the task of the researcher to chart that life history before conducting analysis and drawing conclusions. In the analysis stage of the research process, the researcher needs to stay vigilant and apply the same level of focus and attention to each topic discussed to sufficiently chart an individual's life history. Finally, the rules of the BNIM are there to provide empirical legitimacy to a theoretically-driven research project. The constraints of the interview and the benefits are only as effective as the researcher. It can be quite difficult during the interview or analysis process to stave off directing an interview or applying theory too early, but this short-sighted stance will reduce the heuristic value of the habitus and reinforce the charges of structural determinism.

### **Case study 2: Dispositions in digital scholarship**

The second case study relates to the study of scholarly activity online. It explores how academic practices around scholarship have been affected by digital technologies, more concretely, the web. The web as a site of intellectual participation and production is an emergent phenomenon that is slowly redefining the contribution of academia and the role of scholars in the wider social context, with academics increasingly realising that the production and communication of knowledge can be conducted more autonomously (Lupton, 2014). These developments, however, do not come without challenges as digital scholarship practices are often regarded as antagonists of a long-standing academic tradition. With this observation in mind, this case study aimed to investigate the dispositions that characterise academic researchers engaged in digital scholarship practices (see Costa, 2014) to understand the meaning they attribute to their academic work.

In order to develop an understanding of the dispositions associated with digital scholarship practices, Bourdieu's theory of habitus was adapted according to categories of thinking, value systems and strategies that currently guide the practices of digital scholarship. In this regard, the research built on the work of Weller (2011), who categorises digital scholarship practices according to a three-element framework: 1) digital, 2) networked and 3) open(ness). If the first element of Weller's framework refers to the structure on which practice happens – the digital web – the other two elements relate to the social and cultural approaches that characterise and encourage a new type of scholarly practice online.

Taking Bourdieu's works into account in which habitus is regarded as '...an endless capacity to engender products – perceptions, expressions, actions – whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its productions...' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 95), the research set out to conceptualise habitus within the historical and socio-cultural dimensions that characterise the web and its practices. Although relatively young, the web was invented to serve the purposes of information sharing and collaboration (Berners-Lee, 1998) and has evolved with the goal of offering free access to information and the production of it. Weller's classification of digital scholarship practices is not too far off from this historical context nor is it from the socio-cultural practices that are therein found and which are mainly typified by approaches to unrestricted participation and publication of knowledge – a game changer for the academy. This take on the web allowed for a conceptualisation of digital scholar dispositions as networked and open. Such dispositions are carriers of a value-system which valorises free access to knowledge and sharing of information within and beyond specialised knowledge networks.

Applying this categorisation to habitus theory allowed the research to explore specific dispositions that digital scholars acquire informally online and to examine how these

dispositions are transferred to participants' professional settings. Thus, digital scholars' dispositions were conceptualised as: 1) the strategies they have developed online to challenge the traditional means of knowledge production and dissemination; 2) their tendency to congregate with like-minded social capital online; and 3) their propensity toward initiatives, such as the open access movement, that challenge the rules of the academic field and the game it aims to play. Framing the fieldwork with Bourdieu's theory of habitus required the development of methodological instruments to not only capture the digital dispositions defined by the project but also to help trace such dispositions as part of research participants' trajectories of practice. This did not come without challenges, as explained below.

### **Capturing digital dispositions: the role of narrative inquiry**

If the first challenge was to conceptualise digital habitus, the second challenge consisted of making methodological decisions regarding how participants' dispositions could be accessed. Employing a similar approach to Bourdieu's later work (see Bourdieu, 1999), this case study made use of practice-based narrative inquiry as a means of unearthing what is often implied but not discussed. Devising theory as method requires not only a choice for a given technique of data collection, but also a clear and well thought out way of disclosing what the research aims are (Costa & Murphy, 2015). Narrative inquiry in this specific case provided not only aimed to honour the complexities of participants' practices, but also to illuminate the properties of their academic habitus in more explicit ways by materialising theory through method. Narrative interviews were, thus, designed to: 1) access participants' own understandings of their own digital scholarship practices; 2) examine the values and principles they shared in relation to their digital scholarship practices; and 3) explore the strategies participants developed to put their perceptions of scholarship into practice, i.e., participants' ability to 'play the game'.

It is important to note here that even though practice-based narrative inquiry shares similarities with BNIM, they are regarded as two different sub-genres within qualitative research into social lives. These differences are determined by the research questions of the inquiry it aims to serve (Kim, 2015, p.117). Even though both methods are often used in the exploration of lived experiences, they differ when it comes to the locus and temporality stretch the research aims to investigate. Whereas practice-based narrative inquiry explores the particularities of participants' professional experiences across time and contexts, BNIM's longitudinal aspect is much broader and far reaching in that it aims to capture individuals' comprehensive personal trajectory. In other words, BNIM focuses on the (re)construction of research participants' biographical experiences as a form of accessing the development of 'personality' during the life course (Zinn, 2004). Practice-based narrative inquiry, on the other hand, aims to access individuals' practices in a given or extended moment and place (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480). Place thus becomes an inquiry boundary that delimits the accounts of participants (Kim, 2015, p. 158) in practice-based narratives. In the case of this study, place is delimited to the web and academia as loci of scholarly practice.

The design of the practice-based narrative interview guide took into account different methodological requirements. To start, the project approached reflexivity as an essential component of the study of social practice (Wacquant & Bourdieu, 1992, p.36). Reflexivity as a research tool is able to evoke participants' capacity of analysing their own practice and denoting researchers' place in the research setting. As a form of meaning-making of social experience, narrative inquiry brings attention to the perspective of the participant as both actor and first interpreter of the experiences narrated (Atkinson, 1998). The greatest vulnerability of narrative inquiry is that it relies on participants' accounts and conceptions of their own practice as research evidence; yet, this is probably also its greatest advantage in that it offers possibilities



to access participants' chronology of professional practice as a representation of their ever-forming academic habitus. As Wacquant (2016) contends, habitus is but 'historicised subjectivity' (p. 69). Narrative inquiry focused on practice, on the other hand, is a tool to recover social reality through a process of reflexive reconstruction. It is, therefore, important to reiterate that sociological reflexivity does not aim to apprehend what happened but, rather, to access the meaning the narrator attributes to it (Atkinson, 1998). The integrity of narrative inquiry, thus, relies on the relationship between method and findings regarding the social reality the research aims to represent. Hence, the emphasis here is on trustworthiness of the research rather than on more positivist conceptions of reliability. Reality, in this case, is a social construct.

In order to provide research participants with a stage to reflect on their digital practices and give researchers an opportunity to identify the dispositions that make up their digital scholarly habitus, the research interviews were devised around the digital scholarship dispositions of digital, networked and open (See Weller, 2011). To allow participants to 're-live' their experiences within the context of their academic practice, each research interview started by eliciting participants' first encounter with the web. The interviews then allowed participants to explore their personal experiences in relation to the macro social structures in which their practices were inserted. Here, the purpose of reflexivity was to bring tacit understandings of practice to a more explicit level – reflexive deliberations of internalised dispositions that had materialised into representations of digital scholarship practices.

This, however, raised the challenge of ensuring that the purpose of the research was aligned to the narration while, at the same time, making adequate space for narrative flow and accuracy. The researcher's challenge was to keep participants within the reflexive boundaries of the inquiry and make sure participants explored the idiosyncrasies of their digital practices.

This they did by tracing the roots of their digital dispositions and comparing and contrasting their digital scholarship practices to more conventional approaches. In this case study, habitus is, therefore, identified when the individual feels like a 'fish out of water' (Nowicka, 2015).

Identifying this sense of displacement in dispositional form was not always a straightforward process in this case study. One of the reasons for this is that digital scholarship practices demarcate a new, distinctive activity that is not yet fully established nor recognised by and in academia. To some extent, the lack of institutional recognition does not help the cause, as it encourages a form of misrecognition on behalf of digital scholars – a form of symbolic violence. It challenges their positionality and the legitimacy of their digital dispositions in relation to the academic game. As such, participants often differentiated between what they understood as academic practices and what they regarded as online practices. Their sometimes reluctance to make links between the two types of practices made the job of the researcher even more challenging; moving between the position of the interlocutor and the narrator is difficult enough methodologically without the extra layer of complexity resulting from the cleft habitus. The question of importance here as a researcher is: what is being narrated?

Difference is a valuable indicator of a disjointed habitus (Bourdieu, 1984), whilst the questioning of doxified practices can develop into an instrument of self-analysis and reflexivity on behalf of the researcher and the researched, yet reflexivity, in the case of this research, can only foster trustworthiness of narration when the necessary symbolic conditions become available to challenge the dominant practices of academia (Bourdieu, 1977). It might be the case that the researched, in a time of major change, find it difficult to extract themselves from the field within which their work is legitimised (or not).

## **Discussion**

Placed side by side, what do these two different studies tell us about the relation between social theory and methodology, specifically when applying the concept of habitus in different contexts? It can be said that the conceptualisation of habitus is specific to a given social phenomena as well as to the purposes of the research, i.e., the dimensions the researcher aims to disclose, which in turn need to be reflected in the research instruments that are devised for each research inquiry, including the specific types of engagement with the respective research participants. The case studies presented in this paper show that the operationalisation of habitus differs from one research project to another. As such, operationalisations of the concept of habitus, i.e., how habitus informs and works in the background of data collection strategies, are driven by the questions the research aims to answer, thus showing its flexible nature with regards to the research context. For example, in the study of graduate employment, habitus is perceived through patterns of practice via the repetition of behaviours and approaches, whilst the study on digital scholarship goes on to capture participants' habitus by identifying the different types of practices that typify and differentiate the two worlds in which participants operate.

While the guiding reference for capturing habitus in both studies is centred on its historicity (see Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 139-140), the way each study arrives at its understanding is quite different. Whereas the first study uncovers habitus by identifying routines and patterns of practice which Bourdieu sees as 'a tendency for self-reproduction' (ibid, p. 140), the second study ends up detecting cleft habitus 'in the form of tensions and contradictions' (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 64).

Nevertheless, despite contrasting definitions and forms of operationalisation, both case studies point to the heuristic value of the habitus and its continuing application when examining

these concepts. It is also the case that the application of habitus across the two studies identifies more convergence than divergence in terms of the theory-method relationship. This convergence is especially acute when we hone in on the ways in which habitus is encountered by the researchers. Both studies encounter the rupture of individual's habitus through out-of-environment experiences and embodiment of another field's rules, respectively. This is an important point. Wacquant's description of habitus as 'being endowed with *built-in inertia*' (2005, p. 314, emphasis in original) illustrates the empirical challenge associated with habitus. In times of change or rupture, the habitus – albeit, a reconfigured habitus – provides a point of reference to observe and examine dispositions.

This temporal and historical dimension to habitus is central to its significance and to the way in which it is researched. Herein lies a core dilemma for the researchers in both studies: how to balance longitudinal concerns with latitudinal research methods. In the context of the studies reported in this paper, to apprehend habitus empirically means to acquire a longitudinal understanding of the social conditions of the (re)production of dispositions through a latitudinal approach to the operationalisation of habitus. The collection and reconstruction of agents' life histories is an important technique for the (historical) recovery of social phenomena that can no longer be retrieved through longitudinal research, given the temporal gap between the past moments in which habitus starts to develop and the present instances in which the research takes place. Due to the difficulty in obtaining funding for such approaches, researchers are left to devise methodological tools that aim to collect and analyse periods of agents' experiences through latitudinal techniques and approaches. As demonstrated in this paper, biographical and narrative interview methods can be devised for the purpose of 'capturing' participants' habitus, yet it is the preparatory work the researcher devotes to conceptualising habitus (in light of his/her research questions) that transform such techniques into effective research methods. In

other words, it is not what participants narrate about their practices as part of their continuous experience but how they account for the dispositional aspects that constitute their habitus. Furthermore, the rich and thick data often produced by these methods provides an opportunity to address the double bind (Bourdieu, 1992) researchers face when they substitute common sense for learned common sense.

With this temporal aspect comes a particular set of challenges for the researcher centred around positionality and reflexivity. One of the main challenges is due to reliance – and, therefore, vulnerability – of the researcher in relation to the research participants who, assuming the role of raconteurs, offer up the meanings they themselves attribute to both their own practices and the conventions that shape their social worlds. Even through such participant-led interpretations are, in themselves, an indication of their narrators' habitus, this type of approach requires analytical caution when working with the accounts collected. Participants' accounts should not be treated simply as research data but, rather, as interactive instances in which the participants provide personal meanings of experience whilst taking into account their interlocutors, i.e., the researchers (Pereira, 2010). In other words, participants' narratives are anchored in their own interpretations and should therefore be treated as (re)constructions of lived experiences within a given socio-cultural, political and economic context, which may or may have not been already rehearsed to other non-research publics (Costa, 2013).

Unsurprisingly, the issue of researcher reflexivity is a common concern in much Bourdieu-inspired literature, particularly when it comes to the methodological power of the interview (Clegg & Stevenson, 2013; Hampshire *et al*, 2013; Pillow, 2003). The challenges faced in the studies presented here find echoes in the work of other researchers who, *a la* Bourdieu, take seriously the need to problematise and minimise the impact of 'scholasticism'

(Kenway & McLeod, 2004, p. 529). Take, for example, Slembrouck's anxiety over the role of situational factors impacting on 'what is sayable' in interview situations (2004, p. 106) and the concerns raised by Hoskins (2015, p. 398) about reducing participants' complex life experiences and life history to 'significantly abridged versions' in interview scenarios.

It is this temporal aspect that arguably presents the greatest challenge to the methodological issues explored in this paper, and which are characterised by Caetano (2015, p. 230) as the 'time lapse' between the exercise of reflexivity at specific moments and the 'discourse produced by each individual about that process retrospectively in a research context':

We can ask someone to talk about past reflections, but that distance in time results in a possible reconstruction of senses and meanings. Each person's discourse is filtered by memory, experience, social circumstances and emotional states, and these constrain access to what they actually thought at a given moment in their lives. (Caetano, 2015, p. 230)

The interplay between subjectivity and reflexivity is, thus, an important aspect in the application of the Bourdieuan habitus. The challenge for the researcher is to navigate between the two to arrive at new understandings of the phenomenon at hand. In this paper, reflexivity is achieved first through acts of narration aimed at translating individuals' experiences into 'tangible' forms of knowledge that bring tacit understandings of practices to a 'visible' state; 'the turning back of the experience of the individual upon [herself/himself]' (Mead, 1934/1967, p. 134). But, as the interaction between the researcher and the research participants evolves from mere accounts of personal history into acts of introspection – and as the dispositions that

characterise individuals' habitus start to become more perceptible – it is also the researcher's task to engage in a second phase of reflexivity in which what was narrated with a tone of familiarity needs to be approached from a distance to arrive at renewed understandings of the social reality under focus. Even then – and Bourdieu would agree (see Bourdieu, 2004, p. 111) – it is not easy to identify the dispositions that lay underneath the practices we aim to study. Critical reflexivity is, therefore, an essential tool in acquiring new knowledge (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 65). The process to reach this level of reflexivity is through instigating an epistemological break (Bourdieu, *et al.*, 1991). Through applying an abstract theoretical lens on the everyday, we make it unfamiliar and can begin to ask questions.

The process of formulating research questions is, however, dependent on the dispositions that are under investigation – the key variable in these two case studies. The issue of 'choosing' variables or indicators of study is a long-standing one for many areas of theoretically-informed research. For Bourdieuan research that has generally manifested itself in the operationalisation of capitals – in particular, cultural capital (Bennett, *et al.*, 2009; Savage, *et al.*, 2015) – the same questions need to be asked in relation to the dispositions we focus on and the areas of repetition we examine when trying to unearth the habitus. At the beginning of this paper, we asserted that an isolated set of dispositions does not make a habitus. From this position, we have to ask ourselves two questions: how do we choose the dispositions to examine/question; and how can we discuss the habitus in reference to a few essentially isolated dispositions. The answers to these questions are not easy ones and will continue to be debated; however, reflecting on Bourdieu's own methodological approach can provide a starting point. When pushed by Wacquant (1992) to provide an overview of his approach to methods, Bourdieu provided a three-level model that is summarised by Grenfell (2008, p. 222):

1. Analyse the position of the field *vis-à-vis* the field of power.

2. Map out the objective structure of relations between the positions occupied by agents who compete for the legitimate forms of specific authority of which the field is a site.
3. Analyse the habitus of agents; the systems of dispositions they have acquired by internalising a deterministic type of social and economic condition.

For this discussion, it is the third level of Bourdieu's model which is most pertinent. Grenfell argues that the facets of the habitus – essentially, the various dispositions – are only analysed as they relate to the field. He qualifies his position: 'in other words, we are interested in how particular attributes, which are social in as much as they only have value in terms of the field as a whole. We are not concerned with individual idiosyncrasies' (2008, p. 223). When we discuss habitus, we are talking about it in a particular context, and, as such, the dispositions which are chosen are understood to be related to a particular field, and habitus is discussed in relation to that specific context. This process requires a keen reflexive approach fostered through the combination of an epistemological break and previous research but also grounded by empirical findings. There are clear parallels between this position and Weber's (1904) comments on how to choose which social interactions are worthy of investigation whilst maintaining a level of empirical rigour. In Weber's attempt to provide a scientific method, he argues that the infinite number of interactions between individuals requires a blunt vetting system in order to provide usable data. Alongside the dilution of empirical certainty – lauded by the Positivists – Weber advocated that 'we cannot discover however, what is meaningful to use by means of a 'presuppositionless' investigation of empirical data' (1949, p. 76). Rather, an application of social logic – in other words, informed/theoretical common sense – will reduce the infinite number of actions, reactions and interactions to a manageable quota whilst maintaining scientific authority. While we would advocate for more strenuous oversight than



advocated by Weber, the principle of making an ‘informed’ decision based on the empirical requirements and the field of study is clear.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have attempted to sketch out how habitus can be operationalised as method and, in turn, how it can move theoretical understandings forward through a tailored application of the concept applied to the research phenomenon at hand. We have demonstrated that defining the properties of the habitus is a complex exercise that requires a clear understanding of the facets of habitus in which the research is interested.

In their own way, the two studies go on to excavate deeper into participants’ histories to access their practice backgrounds and study instances of change or extension of their experiences. Although the means through which this is achieved diverge from project to project – from biographical interviews to narrative inquiry – there is an underlining assumption that we arrive at understandings and instances of habitus by tracing individuals’ subjective trajectories. However, in this paper, we have illustrated that such tracing of dispositions has a temporal and historical dimension which tends to add another layer of complexity onto what is already a complex theory-method relationship. Habitus as a research lens requires careful methodological considerations that go beyond a mere choice of research techniques. It also requires the conceptualisation of theory as a research instrument ready to unearth the unspoken realities that characterise individual and collective dispositions. It is this concerted effort to understanding social practices in its methodological and theoretical dialectic that allows researchers to move forward the contribution habitus makes to the social sciences.

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