

**SOME FURTHER (ORTHODOX?) BOURDIEUSIAN REFLECTIONS ON
THE NOTIONS OF ‘INSTITUTIONAL HABITUS’ AND ‘FAMILY HABITUS’
- UNEXPURGATED**

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Some further (orthodox?) Bourdieusian reflections on the notions of 'institutional habitus' and 'family habitus' – unexpurgated¹

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Abstract

This paper is an unedited version of a reply to Burke et al's (forthcoming) response to my critique of the notions of 'institutional habitus' and 'family habitus' in the sociology of education. It begins by welcoming the work done by the threesome to distance themselves from some of the clumsier uses of the terms in previous research but then, via a revisiting of the three fatal flaws underscored in the original paper, points out that the processes and themes supposedly spotlighted by the new concepts have already been named and conceived by Bourdieu but much more clearly and coherently. Finally, I contemplate the trio's strategy of positioning themselves and their misapprehension of Bourdieu as a gallant heterodoxy compared to the crude and uncritical orthodoxy that my own efforts supposedly represent.

Keywords: Bourdieu, class, education, family, habitus, schools

¹ This text was drafted as a response for *The British Journal of Sociology of Education* but was longer than the word allowance stipulated. A condensed and reworked version was submitted for publication in the end, but the original, longer argument developed here may be of interest to those who read the former.

Social science, just like the natural sciences, requires the ‘friendly-hostile cooperation of many’, to use Popper’s (1962: 217) words, if it is to work toward objectivity and sharpen up its models of the world. I am, therefore, pleased that Ciaran Burke, Nathan Emmerich and Nicola Ingram (forthcoming), who I would consider to be more toward the ‘friendly’ pole of the scale, have taken it upon themselves to defend the two concepts I targeted in my piece (Atkinson, 2011) – institutional habitus and family habitus – and provide an opportunity for further clarification. None of them conjured the notions themselves, and only one of them has used them in published work that I am aware of, but they evidently feel they are of such utility in the sociology of education, and beyond, that they must be protected. My response will be threefold: first of all, by forcing them to clarify what they mean by the concepts and distance themselves from some of the clumsy ways in which institutional/family habitus have been described in the past, my initial critique can be said to have been successful; secondly, I will re-emphasise my point, by considering their responses to the three key charges I laid out, that the phenomena and processes they do want to use collective habitus to analyse are already explicable using existing concepts from Bourdieu but that the latter are somewhat more precise, less confusing and more decisively disentangled from prenotions; and finally I will ponder the trio’s somewhat disingenuous strategy of positioning themselves and their misapprehension of Bourdieu as a heroic heterodoxy compared to the unthinking and objectionable orthodoxy that my own efforts supposedly represent.

A Subtle Shift in Meaning

‘Using the concept [institutional or family habitus] does not’, say Burke et al, ‘entail considering all the individuals that fall within its remit to share an identical habitus, and does not entail considering individuals within a group to have a single habitus between them’, nor does it ‘imply some kind of substantial “super-habitus”’ over and above them or that institutions ‘have an emotional life’ of their own. Fantastic – at one stroke they have dispensed with some of the most troublesome elements of the claim that schools and families possess habitus. It is unclear whether this is a clarifying revision or whether they think this has always been the case, but the reader

can look over some of the original uses, and my initial critique, to judge for themselves the extent to which Diane Reay and others have talked of the institutional/family habitus implicitly or explicitly in such terms. Of course, as Burke et al are neither the originators nor the most celebrated users of the notions it is anyone's guess whether they represent the mainstream construal of institutional/family habitus, or whether the concepts will be used by persistent advocates with careful attention to this distancing, but it is to be welcomed nonetheless.

So what *do* the notions of institutional/family habitus refer to for this threesome? So far as I can tell, two things: on the one hand, the fact that certain people are gelled together in perception as belonging to a particular 'school' or 'family', with a degree of unity and shared experience and expectations, which then shapes their actions; and on the other hand, the way in which the school or family *seems* to act as a monolithic agent through its delegated spokespeople. Now if readers think that sounds not only perfectly reasonable but rather familiar they have good reason: these are *precisely the phenomena that I described under the labels of field doxa and 'mystery of ministry' in my critique*. There is thus nothing at all wrong with wanting to talk about those processes per se, but the problems arise in the way in which they are conceived, and to my mind the *existing* ways of conceiving them are clearer, more powerful and more rigorous than the supposed 'innovation'. Let me demonstrate this by considering their responses to my triad of charges against the institutional/family habitus.

Three Fatal Flaws Revisited

Homogenisation

Burke et al respond to my contention that to call a school, family etc a habitus is to obscure the internal struggles brought to light by analysing them as fields by defending the utility of the term for drawing attention to 'what is common and shared by a collective', the 'degree of affinity between members', 'the habitus of members of an institution as *members* and not merely individuals' and 'how the group functions and is maintained through shared experiences and practices'. Indeed, they add, only on the basis of an acknowledgement of this shared ground can 'an adequate examination and socio-analysis of heterodoxy' – such as that espoused by maverick teachers – 'be achieved'. Now it should hopefully be pretty clear to the reader that this

is *exactly* what I originally talked about under the label of doxa (school ethos/family spirit), so I am hardly likely to dispute the processes *per se*. But why do I call it doxa and not institutional habitus? Well not *just* because it is the term Bourdieu himself used, though that in itself raises the question of why a new term would be needed, but because it possesses the analytical merit of specifically denoting *that which is shared by a set of agents engaged in struggle*: the fundamental, taken for granted, shared assumptions of what goes and what one does in that game that come from common participation. It thus keeps analysts perpetually aware of unity *and* difference, or more precisely unity *amongst* difference, and to consensus *and* conflict at the same time. Institutional/family habitus, on the other hand, shrouds the contention amongst the implicated agents, and it is striking that when Burke et al do admit struggle exists they have no option but to rather inconsistently fall back on the language of doxa (and orthodoxy/heterodoxy), leaving one wondering why they would then bother to use the term institutional habitus at all.

One defence might be that it is useful to talk about institutional/family habitus in the same way that one might talk of an ‘artistic habitus’ – i.e. the habitus of those engaged in the artistic field, united by the shared experiences and expectations there – to distinguish it from the ‘political habitus’ and so on, as a kind of shorthand for ‘habitus in relation to a specific field’. This, I would assume, is the grounds for Burke et al’s occasional, slightly obscure, calls for analysis at the ‘median level’, i.e. relations between the habitus of different institutions such as schools. Such a call is, however, in need of some working through, and not only because it is premised on some fairly nebulous statements – we are told we are ‘in need of a principle of freedom at the median level’ without further elaboration – and probably redundant – as it would surely just be a field analysis of institutions. It is as unfruitful to talk of an ‘institutional habitus’ *per se* as it is to talk of an ‘artistic habitus’ *per se*. The doxa from a field may be layered *within* the habitus of each member as dispositions and taken-for-granted assumptions, but this is only one element of habitus – the fundamental counterpart is the set of evaluative schemata and sense of possible actions or ‘moves’ given by the agent’s *particular position* within the field. To refer to an ‘institutional habitus’ would thus, more rigorously speaking, be to allude to both elements at once and thus necessitate a referent in a determinate position in the field, in the same way that to talk of an ‘artistic habitus’ would be to invoke both a commitment to and knowledge of the artistic field *and* a singular artist’s own

strategies within it, and if one simply wants to draw attention to the different taken-for-granted assumptions, expectations and experiences shared in different institutions (*qua* fields) surely it is much clearer just to talk of different doxa, or school ethos?²

Anthropomorphism

The response to my second charge, anthropomorphism, consists of a rejection of the idea, encoded in the language of earlier contributions, that the institutional/family habitus is the possession of a singular super-agent – all very welcome – but a desire to keep hold of the concept because it is useful for grasping the way in which schools etc. ‘may gain “dispositional” power through key figures within them and especially through the actions or performances of key figures in their roles as shaped by the institution’. ‘It is,’ they continue (and notice the qualifier), ‘almost as if the actors become the institution’ – they certainly ‘animate’ it. Here, of course, they are getting at what Bourdieu called the ‘mystery of ministry’ – the process in which certain agents attempt to impose a unified conception of a collective (school, family etc) and ‘what is done’ within it, both to those deemed constitutive and those beyond its symbolic boundaries, to the extent that they present themselves *as* the collective. It is no surprise they can find textual support from Bourdieu to this effect and I can only surmise they missed the part of my original paper in which I explicitly talked about it.

I have a few points to make in response. Firstly, it is confusing, if not simply contradictory, to want to use the same concept to describe both the set of phenomena I would put under field-specific doxa *and* the practices implicated in the mystery of ministry. Use of the latter two notions at the very least allows an extra degree of analytical *clarity*. Secondly, Bourdieu’s discussions of mystery of ministry and ‘group making’ specifically draw attention to the way in which the effort to impose an accepted vision and act on behalf of a collective is bound up at the same time with symbolic power, struggle and opposition, that is to say, the structure of and strategies within a pertinent field (including the social space in the case of ‘classes’). The quotes marshalled from Bourdieu (1990: 56-8), when set in their full context, indicate as much: at several points, including within the text cited by Burke et al, he clarifies that by ‘institution’ he means a ‘state of capital’ or field, and it is clear that he is talking of

² To be fair I have fallen victim to this error myself in previous work (Atkinson, 2009) where I talked of a ‘police habitus’ and ‘firefighter’s habitus’ rather than policing doxa and firefighting doxa, partly because I was less certain then than I am now that many occupational domains and workplaces constitute fields.

the subtle work of fostering (self-) *belief* that certain biological individuals personify trans-individual entities. Burke et al's attempt to use institutional habitus for this purpose, on the other hand, once again cuts power and struggle out of the picture. Thirdly, and related to the last point, the terms institutional/family habitus threaten to fudge rhetoric and reality, take certain presentations of collective self at face value and commit the fallacy of misplaced concreteness by encouraging talk of 'collective actors' and 'given social groups' as if they had an ontological existence equivalent to fields. As I see it – and I am probably less ambiguous (and more phenomenological) on this than Bourdieu (and Wacquant too) – categories of thought stemming from field struggles are 'realised' insofar as they affect belief that such-and-such 'group' exists and that people act according to that belief (which will have structural *effects* insofar as it may include a 'closing of ranks' and thus tighter clustering in fields), but it creates no new, separate social structure with its own causal powers *except* where that realisation generates a distinct set of field relations (relatively autonomous doxa, capital, etc.), as is the case with family/school, but even then one must always bracket the perceptions and presentations of the field amongst its participants in order to understand their genesis and contestation. True, Bourdieu (1985) once added in a brief and elliptical think-piece that where dispersion of a cluster within a field or social space united under a specific label is minimal and the habitus and interests thus very similar it may harden into a solidary 'corps' concerned to collectively maintain its capital, and he even expressly identified 'family' as an example. Moreover, schools might be considered candidates for what Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), in an off-hand allusion to Althusser, called 'apparatuses', or sets of relations characterised by total domination. In both cases, however, he also recognised it was an *empirical* question, i.e. dependant on the strength of integration and lack of struggle or, as I would put it, the strength of the doxa/family spirit/school ethos, and my own view is that instances where families and schools could be considered 'corps' or 'apparatuses' with no challenge to any element of doxa rather than a field would be rare indeed, at least in contemporary Western societies. Burke et al indicate as much too, at least on schools, when they mobilise the vocabulary of fields, but it is also instructive to note that Bourdieu nowhere ventures into talk of institutional/family habitus in all this, implying that such a move would be conceptually imprecise and inapt.³

³ The only instance I have yet found of anyone within Bourdieu's own research group using either term

Substantialism

As to the final indictment of the institutional/family habitus, substantialism, Burke et al confess to being ‘confused’ by this – surprising given that the substantialism/relationalism opposition is one of the most basic philosophical underpinnings of Bourdieu’s theory (not to mention the history of science and philosophy in general). So let me clarify: substantialism is the Aristotelian doctrine that entities have a discrete substance or essence unto themselves; relationalism, which eventually superseded substantialist thought in mathematics and natural science (as documented by Cassirer, 1923), holds instead that the properties of an entity are given by its position in a system of relations with other entities. The habitus, for Bourdieu, was always inherently relational in this way: the experiences sedimenting into and the consequent dispositions constituting it are differentiated according to its position within a system of relations, namely a field, and relations between fields (homologies, legitimation circuits, etc.).⁴ My original point, then, was that if one wants to talk of schools or families as agents with their own habitus, then this would assume the positioning of those super-agents within a field, but seeing as users of the ideas had not and – especially in the case of families – could not do that consistently, then it must be deduced that the super-agent’s habitus was conceived substantially, i.e. its properties derived in and of itself rather than from within a system of relations.

Burke et al have thankfully junked that conception of the institutional/family habitus so the point is no longer salient, though this does not stop them trying to rail against me on different grounds instead. Jumping off from an apparent misunderstanding of substantialism, we get talk of how any one biological individual has multiple habitus because they are implicated in many fields – which Bourdieu himself, as I pointed out, rendered in terms of ‘social surface’ – and that this acts as an extra layer of similarity and difference, or individuation, between concrete individuals in the social space of classes. It is essentially a rerun of the

– completely separate from the use conceived in the sociology of education – is when Abdelmalek Sayad’s (2004: 72) mentions ‘family habitus’ in his analysis of the suffering of the immigrant, though he seems to be getting at the realisation of the dominant (orthodox) definition of ‘family’ within a nation by migrants and goes on to mention the structures of power internal to the family. Even if he were using it in precisely the same way as Burke et al, however – and even if Bourdieu himself did for that matter (so much for faithfulness to text) – I would still lodge exactly the same critical charges on the grounds of logic and clarity.

⁴ For one of the clearest statements to this effect see Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 15-19).

artistic/political habitus type argument, though in rather unclear terms. The presentation of family as a ‘normative structure embedded within society’s values and cultural norms’ and thus ‘aspect of the field’, and ‘mother’, ‘father’ etc as ‘positions within social space’ and so on, is a little muddled and vague. Moreover, the inconsistent and decontextualized citation of Bourdieu (2000) on trans-individual dispositions hardly delivers the cast-iron support they assume: clearly when he is talking of ‘classes of habitus’ which are ‘statistically characterized’ and based on similar ‘conditions of existence’ he is referring to family resemblances within a space of difference in relation to a set of determinate properties as mapped by correspondence analysis, so the class habitus of which I originally spoke (or classes of habitus within a field). In the social space of classes, which Burke et al want to collapse everything into (treating it as a saggy synonym for ‘society’), these are premised on economic, cultural and social capital alone, not any and every difference between people.⁵ What the three are *really* getting at, it appears, is the multiplicity of homologies and intersections between fields and social space, and the symbolic struggles and efforts at ‘class/group making’ they generate, playing out in the experiential worlds, perceptions and concrete interactions of empirical individuals. Considering my previous work, including the original critique, has been concerned with understanding precisely this – envisioning the individual’s lifeworld as the meeting point of experiences and categories of thought emanating from *multiple* fields and spaces of difference creating *multiple* grounds of intersubjectivity – I therefore cannot fathom how their discussion could be the devastating criticism they make it out to be, or even an opposing point at all. All I can do is repeat that to talk of fields and doxa rather than institutional habitus and ‘groups’ allows a much richer analysis of everyday interaction, seeing the latter as, in some instances, the meeting of points of view on the same field but also, in others, the meeting of a point of view on one field with a point of view on another – whether, as in Bourdieu’s (2005: 31) example, the meeting of a point of view on the journalistic field with a point of view on the

⁵ We could apply the principle of charity to Burke et al and assume that, in the case of institutional habitus, they are talking about classes of difference within the field of educational establishments rather than social space, but then ‘statistically characterised’ classes given by the pertinent principles of differentiation there would more than likely draw together *multiple* institutions (just as the cultural fraction of the dominant class in social space comprises artists, writers, higher education teachers etc.). To distinguish one from the other within that on the basis of the *particular* practices etc taken for granted in each it would be best to talk in terms designed for that, i.e. school ethos, which is of course, as Davey (2012) has recently highlighted in her interesting study of a fee-paying school in South England, a specific articulation of the general doxa within the educational field itself.

field of academic history in a TV interview or, more pertinently for the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, the meeting of a point of view on a school field with a point of view on a family field at a parents' evening, career talk etc.

The Defensive Strategy of Self-Declared Heterodoxy

In the end, Burke et al have done little more than outline in an inferior vocabulary, still tangling with prenotions and muddying the waters, the same processes that I flagged. Their claim that institutional/family habitus 'uncover aspects of "reality" that have, hitherto, remained uncovered, unthought, untheorised and unrealised' therefore rings rather hollow. What is most remarkable about all this, however, is their strategy to delegitimize my original critique and assert the value of using different words to Bourdieu by attempting to forge a quasi-Bourdieuian meta-analysis in which my approach and theirs are labelled orthodox and heterodox respectively. To ignore/forget/not know Bourdieu's own concepts, water down others and fail to break fully with prenotions, in other words, is miraculously recast as a virtue – dynamic, flexible, instructive, creative, open, more Bourdieusian – while bracketing doxic belief and plying Bourdieu's own tools (in Bourdieusian analysis remember) is described as unBourdieuian, rigid, unyielding to research, prescriptive, naively realist, trapped by unthinking adherence to sacred texts and to 'shut down' this and that in almost Stalinist manner.

Let me make two remarks on this extraordinary rhetorical work. First of all, there is the obvious point that it is curiously hypocritical to reject an approach using Bourdieu's own tools and logic as 'prescriptive' and then constantly seek to mine Bourdieu's tools and logic for support. Secondly, and more fundamentally, the three somewhat duplicitously try to paint adherence to reasoned argument as unthinking faithfulness to 'text'. This involves no end of categorisation of my work premised on and potentially perpetuating that prevalent mode of mistaking one thing for another which Bourdieu called *allodoxia*. Thus I am occasionally described/decried as 'realist', a notoriously polymorphous label. Exactly what brand they ascribe to me is not especially clear – their affected artistic simile (Michelangelo versus Impressionism) is somewhat unhelpful as it elides deductivism with degrees of approximation – though I think anyone can see it is a bad, 'brutish', perhaps empiricist one, nowhere more patent (apparently) than in my neuro-phenomenological stance. So let me briefly spell out the guiding epistemological commitments contained

within my other writings and, perhaps, not dissimilar to their own. There is a noumenal realm supplying the conditions of possibility of experience which can never be apprehended ‘in itself’. Theoretical models are just that: models, or constructions, bearing the marks of their socio-historical conditions of production, which are controllable only through thorough reflexivity, and having observable effects on the world in turn (the ‘theory effect’). Nevertheless, as Bachelard had it, the noumenal realm, or ideas about a ‘reality’ beyond perception, serves as an *ideal* towards which scientists work and, because models of reality are always *fallible*, we can clear away errors, rectify mistakes and thus produce more refined approximations – hence the ‘philosophy of no’ (Bachelard, 1940). This is not the occasion to spell out the details and trace the divergences, but I would argue that within this there is space for a form of the ‘judgemental rationalism’, or adjudication between models (e.g. relationalism versus substantialism) and concepts (doxa and mystery of ministry versus institutional/family habitus) on the basis of *explanatory purchase* and *coherence* (not textual fideism), proposed by Bhaskar (1986).⁶

Now all this proceeds in part through logic – the construction of the object – but in part through empirical research in which the reasoned model of reality is set to work and elements confirmed or confuted (Bourdieu et al, 1991).⁷ Burke et al misrepresent me somewhat here, making out as if I sit in a cosy armchair building master models unyielding to empirical backbite. In fact my (ongoing) reflections both on the utility of the notion of lifeworld and on the family and schools as fields – as I made quite clear at the time – are rooted in the process of research, at first an inquiry into the motors of life trajectories and sources of schemes of perception (Atkinson, 2010), and latterly an in-depth study of the messy and conflict-ridden reproduction of class in familial life (being written up, though compare Atkinson, forthcoming). This

⁶ The habitus is therefore obviously a model of how social structures ‘get in’ the biological individual, but to leave it at that, rather than try to conceptualise the formative process phenomenologically and neurologically, is to make of the habitus a vague and weak abstraction. It is a bit like being content that a car is the means of getting someone from one place to another without wanting to understand how the engine works and, thus, how it is that some people get places quicker, quieter etc. than others. Moreover, while I am accused of treating the ‘individual’ as a ‘brute fact’, my view is actually that while the social world consists of bundles of relations, the ‘empirical individual’ formed by a multitude of field experiences is as much an interesting and fruitful epistemological construct as the ‘epistemic individual’ analysed only in relation to one field that Bourdieu often focussed on (see especially the discussion in Bourdieu, 1988a).

⁷ While *The Craft of Sociology* focussed on the isolated research act Bourdieu (1988b, 2004) would later flesh out the social context in which scientific logic is exercised and, in particular, the productivity of the clash of orthodoxies and heterodoxies. He did not imply, however, that heterodoxies are automatically better approximations of reality, as one might gather from Burke et al’s argument.

is an iterative process, as Burke et al recognise, but why would it make better sense to stretch the original content of one concept than go back to the corpus from which the reasoned model derives and see if other existing concepts already conceive the same thing?

Here we get to the nub of the matter: given that the ‘orthodox’ Bourdieusian conception of the social world already grasps perfectly well the kinds of processes Burke et al talk about, but more clearly and precisely, and given that our conceptions of social scientific endeavour are probably not all that different, why declare themselves ‘heterodox’ at all? Perhaps, I may venture, to present what is actually a *defensive* strategy attempting to provide *post hoc* theoretical justification for a hasty conceptual idea as a taking of the initiative, and to self-consciously portray themselves – earlier career researchers than me even (already!) – as the avant-garde.⁸ But that is no escape from the demands of the social scientific field: as Bourdieu always made clear, models of the social world, whether heterodox or orthodox, only attain legitimacy in the struggle to describe reality if they come equipped with reason. So I would suggest that, however they want to position and aggrandize themselves rhetorically, if Burke et al, and those who wish to continue to use the terms ‘institutional’ or ‘family habitus’, are not to look stubborn or blasé in their research, it is incumbent upon them to make clear why their favoured notions are advances over doxa (school ethos, family spirit etc.), mystery of ministry or other existing concepts. One might have expected those who coined the terms in the first place to have already done this, but the fact that they did not is, it seems to me, symptomatic of the more or less (some take more than others) partial appropriation of Bourdieu within the sociology of education and the treatment of ‘theory’ as a set of isolatable and elastic ‘tools’ or ‘metaphors’ with which to gloss empirical data rather than a philosophically articulated, or ‘epistemologically charged’ (Grenfell, 2011: 26), model of the social world.

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⁸ Without being too cynical, one also wonders whether the decision to self-style themselves as ‘Bourdieuian’ (without the ‘s’), breaking with convention and ease of pronunciation, is not linked to this.

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