

THINKING LIKE BOURDIEU: Completing the mental revolution with Legitimation Code Theory¹

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INTRODUCTION

How can we think like Bourdieu? This is a crucial question for understanding and enacting field theory. Bourdieu argued that the essential task for social science is to produce a ‘new gaze’ that moves beyond everyday sensual experience to grasp the relational principles underlying the empirical world (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 251). However, achieving such a relational gaze is not easy. Bourdieusian commentators often criticize applications of his ideas as offering a veneer of concepts over empirical description rather than a genuinely relational analysis. Bourdieu himself acknowledged that achieving this new gaze ‘cannot be done without a genuine conversion, a *metanoia*, a mental revolution, a transformation of one’s whole vision of the social world’ (*Ibid.*). In this chapter I argue that while Bourdieu powerfully argues for this transformation, field theory does not itself fully embody relational thinking. The conceptual framework represents an unfinished ‘mental revolution’ that needs augmenting to achieve Bourdieu’s aims. To do so I reach ‘beyond the field theory we know’ to Legitimation Code Theory (LCT), a framework that reveals the organizing principles underlying fields, capitals, habituses and practices. I illustrate how LCT can help realize Bourdieu’s vision by briefly discussing a major study of Chinese students at an Australian university. I show how LCT reveals the principles characterizing their habituses, pedagogic environments, experiences and learning practices. This analysis identifies a ‘code clash’ between students’ habituses and the attributes valorized by their teachers that explains both their negative experiences and a ‘hysteresis of habitus’ effect whereby they continued strategies that mismatched the ‘rules of the game’. Crucially, this analysis offers a relational account by showing the organizing principles underlying these dispositions, positions and practices. It thus illustrates how LCT concepts embody Bourdieu’s mental revolution and so can help others to achieve his relational gaze.

BOURDIEU’S GAZE

As Wacquant argued,

the enduring significance of Bourdieu’s enterprise does not reside in the individual concepts, substantive theories, methodological prescriptions, or empirical observations he offers so much as in the manner in which he produces, uses and relates them ... it is the *modus operandi* of Bourdieu’s sociology... that most fully defines its originality
(in Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: ix)

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For Bourdieu this *modus operandi* – ‘the craft of sociology’ – is embodied in a way of seeing and thinking. He emphasized that to ‘master in a practical state everything that is contained in the fundamental concepts: habitus, field, and so on’ (Bourdieu *et al.* 1991: 253), one must acquire a ‘gaze’ or ‘sociological eye’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 251). However, Bourdieu repeatedly emphasized that achieving this gaze was not easy because it involves a ‘break’ or ‘rupture’ with understandings of the social world that focus on sensual experience. The difficulty arises from such understandings being easily taken for granted as self-evident, an illusion of immediacy and transparency that naturalizes the social world. For Bourdieu, one must especially break with thinking in terms of separate and visible empirical entities, a ‘substantialist’ form of thinking that lends itself to essentialism by treating properties as located *within* specific entities (1984: 22). In contrast Bourdieu emphasized a *relational mode of thinking* that conceives phenomena as realizations of generative principles that are relationally defined. For Bourdieu ‘the *real is the relational*’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 97).

In Bourdieu’s approach ‘the relational’ has horizontal and vertical dimensions. First, Bourdieu (1990: 52–65) viewed practice as arising from relations between ‘two histories’ or evolving logics: agents’ dispositions (‘habitus’) and the positions they occupy (by virtue of their ‘capital’) within an evolving system (‘field’). As illustrated by the formula ‘[(habitus)(capital)] + field = practice’ (Bourdieu 1986: 101), this *horizontally* relates concepts, offering a corrective to accounts that explore only either the attributes of agents or their social contexts. Second, each of these logics is itself relationally conceived: an agent’s dispositions (habitus) are understood as one structure among a range of possible structures; and positions are explored in terms of an agent’s status and resources (capital) in relation to those of other agents within a structured social universe (field) that is itself defined in relation to other social universes. This is to take field, capital, habitus and practice separately and *vertically* relate the specific structure of each to other possible structures. In other words, Bourdieu emphasizes the need to analyse the organizing principles *underlying* empirical realizations of each concept, where the specific setting of those principles (its ‘structure’) derives its characteristics from relations with other possible settings. Grasping both these horizontal and vertical dimensions of relational thinking is crucial to achieving Bourdieu’s ‘mental revolution’ and acquiring his ‘new gaze’.

However, the difficulties of thinking relationally are demonstrated by applications of Bourdieu’s ideas. A series of Bourdieusian commentators have described many studies using his concepts as shallow, reductive and partial (e.g. Reay 2004, Grenfell 2010, Atkinson 2011, James 2015). Often criticisms effectively highlight a lack of one or both dimensions of relationality. Horizontally, analyses of practice are often solely in terms of *either* agents’ dispositions (using ‘habitus’) *or* positions (using ‘capital’ or, less frequently, ‘field’). Vertically, concepts are often used to relabel empirical characteristics rather than to examine the organizing principles underlying dispositions, positions and practices. Such analyses veneer description with theory; for example, social background becomes ‘habitus’, valued attributes become ‘capital’, and context becomes ‘field’. This reintroduces substantialism into field theory, rendering the approach anything but ‘Bourdieuian’. As commentators argue, without deep relationality the concepts are reduced ‘to a meaningless descriptive vocabulary’ (Atkinson 2012: 169).

In short, Bourdieu's concepts have been more widely adopted than his way of thinking: ideas from field theory are often applied without a relational gaze. However, it would be unrelational to lambast scholars but ignore the framework they are using. In this case the framework plays a role because Bourdieu's concepts do not fully embody the relational thinking he called for. This is not easy to see. It is hard to point to what is hidden by a blind spot, though it can become evident through seeing what new concepts reveal, as I show below. Moreover, Bourdieu intended the concepts to be relational, called them relational, and repeatedly cautioned against non-relational thinking. Nonetheless, as highlighted by Boudon's distinction between 'intentional' and 'operative' definitions, there is a difference between intending to construct an object of study relationally and implementing that intention, which may not be possible 'because the necessary mental tools are not available' (1971: 51). In this case, the tools cannot fully implement a relational gaze: they are 'intentional' rather than 'operative'.

X MARKS THE BLIND SPOT

Consider Bourdieu's notion that practice results from the meeting of 'two histories', dispositions and positions, each with its own logic or structure. This raises questions of the nature of those logics, or the organizing principles underlying dispositions, positions and practice. These principles are pointed to by Bourdieu's concepts but not relationally conceptualized. For example, Bourdieu defines 'habitus' as a 'structured and structuring structure' (1994: 170) but does not provide the means to conceptualize that structure as, say, X among a range of possible structures W, X, Y, Z . Accordingly, the effects of habitus are typically shown by scholars describing the practices to which it gives rise, rather than habitus itself being analysed in terms of its underlying principles and the system of possible settings of those principles that give a particular setting its meaning (cf. Bourdieu 1990: 4). Without exploring those principles, one can argue that agents feel like 'fish out of water' because their habituses do not match the field (to take an oft-used example), but one cannot show the *basis* of that mismatch: one cannot reveal the X structure of the habitus and the Y structure dominating the field. Moreover, without conceptualizing these structures one cannot systematically show similarity and difference or change over time. What is, for example, the structure of a 'working-class habitus' and how does it differ from that of a 'middle-class habitus'? (I mention social class but these points hold for other categories, including gender and ethnicity). How can one show when an agent's habitus has changed or remained the same between different situations or over time? The same questions can be asked of similarity, difference and change in the structures of 'capital', 'position', 'field' and 'practice'. To avoid using these concepts as a veneer requires a 'break' or 'rupture' with empirical description into a conceptual language that reveals these structures without merely recounting agents' practices. The aim is to reveal the organizing principles (the X) underlying a specific set of empirical instances and show how they may be varied (e.g. to W, Y, Z) to generate different empirical instances. As Bourdieu insisted:

The challenge is systematically to interrogate the particular case by constituting it as a 'particular instance of the possible,' as Bachelard (1949) put it, in order to extract general or invariant properties that can be uncovered only by such interrogation.

(in Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 233)

In his major studies Bourdieu began to reveal these properties, typically through binary categories. For example, in his study of French cultural taste (Bourdieu 1984), the distinctive lifestyles and consumer preferences of working-class and bourgeois subcultures were characterized by ‘virtue of necessity’ and ‘freedom from necessity’, respectively. Similarly, in his study of the academic field, Bourdieu (1988) characterized agents striving for ‘intellectual capital’ (such as scholarly renown) as oriented inwards towards the field’s specific activities and agents striving for ‘academic capital’ (institutional power as oriented outwards to economic and political forms of success). However, while these dichotomous types highlight what needs to be conceptualized as relational principles, those principles remained just out of reach; in these examples, there are no concepts for analysing degrees of distance from necessity or strengths of external boundaries.¹ Without those concepts, the analysis does not extract ‘general or invariant properties’ that could be used in studies of other fields – the binary categories are locked into their objects of study. This matters because, lacking such concepts, many scholars using Bourdieu’s approach rely instead on the pre-constructed notions he warned against, such as citing social classes to proclaim, for example, a disjuncture between the ‘working-class habitus’ of a student and a ‘middle-class’ educational institution. By using such pre-constructed categories such descriptions present as self-evident the very things that need to be analysed: the structure of the habitus and the structure of the capital valorized by that position in the field. The concepts then add little to empirical description beyond a veneer of theoretical sophistication. Bourdieu often emphasized the need for ‘vigilance’ to avoid these problems but conceded that the ‘mere fact of being on the alert is important but hardly suffices’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 238). One also needs relational concepts.

In sum, to understand practice relationally one must conceptualize ‘vertically’ by revealing the relational X of, say, a habitus in order to analyse ‘horizontally’ by relating that X to the X , W , Y or Z of capital, position, practice, etc. This entails a break from description in terms of pre-constructed categories into a conceptual language capable of revealing and relating these relational structures. Relational analysis thus requires not only a relational gaze but also relational concepts. However, while Bourdieu made clear what a relational gaze entails, his concepts do not fully embody that gaze. This is not to dismiss Bourdieu’s ideas – they are extremely powerful. Rather, it is to recognize the limits of the concepts as they currently stand and to highlight why they need augmenting if we are to implement Bourdieu’s intentions. Specifically, we require a means of conceptualizing the organizing principles (the X) underlying dispositions, positions and practices. Without those concepts, the framework will continue to lend itself to veneering of empirical description by scholars lacking a relational gaze. Moreover, it will remain extremely difficult for anyone to acquire that gaze, as even prolonged and sustained use of Bourdieu’s concepts cannot shape, enact or sustain a relational gaze – they lack the X factor. The need, then, is for relational concepts that convert Bourdieu’s gaze into tools capable of helping others acquire that gaze. For this I turn to Legitimation Code Theory.

LCT: AN INVITATION TO RELATIONAL SOCIOLOGY

Legitimation Code Theory or ‘LCT’ is a sociological framework that extends, *inter alia*, Bourdieu’s field theory and Bernstein’s code theory (Maton 2014). Since emerging at the turn of the century, LCT has grown rapidly as the basis of research by an international and multidisciplinary community into a widening range of issues in education, politics, law and other social fields (Maton *et al.* 2016).² The framework of LCT comprises a multi-dimensional conceptual toolkit. Each dimension includes concepts for analysing a particular set of organizing principles as a species of *legitimation code* (Maton 2014). These dimensions are ‘simultaneous’: they explore not different objects of study but rather different organizing principles that may underlie the same object. Thus, empirical studies often adopt more than one dimension in analysis. Any of the dimensions of LCT could be used here to reveal relational principles underlying dispositions, positions and practices. For brevity I focus on one, Specialization, which is centred on *specialization codes*.

The dimension of Specialization begins from the simple premise that practices are about or oriented towards something and by someone. One can thus analytically distinguish: *epistemic relations* (ER) between practices and their object or focus; and *social relations* (SR) between practices and their subject, author or agent. When applied to knowledge practices these highlight questions of *what* can be legitimately described as knowledge (epistemic relations); and *who* can claim to be a legitimate knower (social relations).

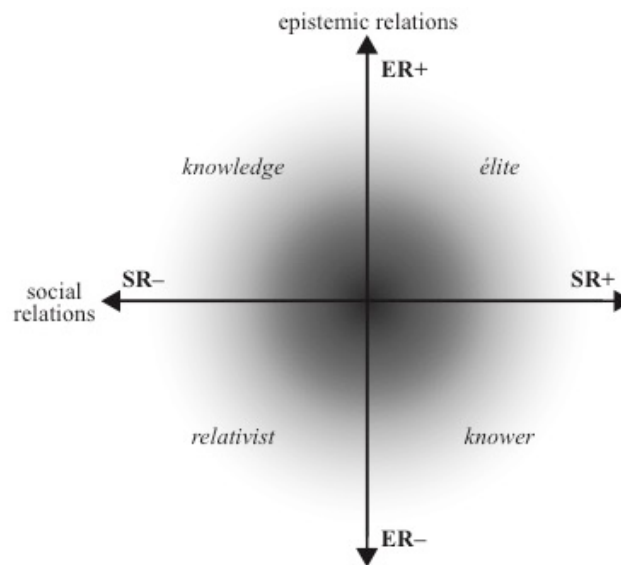


Figure 1: The specialization plane (Maton 2014: 30)

Each relation may be more strongly (+) or weakly (–) emphasized as the basis of legitimacy. These two strengths may be varied independently to generate *specialization codes* (ER+/-, SR+/-). As shown in Figure 1, the two continua of strengths can be visualized as axes of the *specialization plane*, a topological space with four principal codes:

- *knowledge codes* (ER+, SR–), where possession of specialized knowledge, principles or procedures of specific objects of study is emphasized as the basis of achievement, and attributes of agents are downplayed;

- *knower codes* (ER–, SR+), where specialized knowledge and objects are downplayed and attributes of agents are emphasized as measures of achievement, whether viewed as born (e.g. ‘natural talent’), cultivated (e.g. ‘taste’) or social (e.g. standpoint theory);
- *élite codes* (ER+, SR+), where legitimacy is based on both possessing specialist knowledge and being the right kind of knower; and
- *relativist codes* (ER–, SR–), where legitimacy is determined by neither specialist knowledge nor knower attributes – ‘anything goes’.

To understand these concepts in the terms of field theory, consider Bourdieu’s description of a ‘social topology’:

the social world can be represented in the form of a (multi-dimensional) space constructed on the basis of principles of differentiation or distribution constituted by the set of properties active in the social universe under consideration, that is, able to confer force or power on their possessor in that universe. Agents and groups of agents are thus defined by their *relative positions* in this space.

(Bourdieu 1991: 229-30; original emphasis)

Specialization visualizes one dimension of this space as the *specialization plane* (Figure 1) in which agents occupy relational positions. Specialization codes are one set of the ‘principles of differentiation’ constructing the social universe. The specialization plane outlines the full range of possible positions that could be occupied. The particular specialization codes that are ‘active in the social universe’ are determined by empirical research. Bourdieu describes such social universes as ‘fields of forces’, where these forces within which agents are positioned are (contrary to substantialism) irreducible to interactions among them. Specialization codes conceptualize one dimensions of those forces that constitute fields. They are able to ‘confer force or power on their possessor’: a dominant code is both privileged (having priority) and privileging (conferring power upon possessors). Accordingly, agents attempt to maximize their positions by ensuring their own codes are dominant in the social universe.

Specialization codes conceptualize one set of the organizing principles underlying dispositions, positions and practices. Put simply, the basis of legitimacy for each code is: what you know (knowledge codes), the kind of knower you are (knower codes), both (élite codes), or neither (relativist codes). A specific specialization code may dominate as the basis of achievement, but may not be transparent, universal or uncontested. Not everyone may recognize and/or be able to realize what is required, there may be more than one code present, and there are likely to be struggles among agents over which code is dominant. One can thus describe degrees of *code match* and *code clash*, such as between learners’ dispositions and pedagogic practices (see below), education policies and disciplinary conventions, different approaches within an intellectual field, etc. For example, studies of a large-scale educational initiative in Australian schools (Howard & Maton 2011) show the policy successfully integrated technology into subject areas matching its knower-code intentions but was less successful in subjects with other specialization codes, where code clashes were evident. The dominant code may also change, such as between subject areas, classrooms and stages of a curriculum in education or, for dispositions, over the

lifecourse. These *code shifts* can change the ‘rules of the game’. For example, research into music in English schooling (Lamont & Maton 2010) revealed the curriculum shifted from a knower code at primary school to a knowledge code in the early years of secondary school, and then towards an elite code for formal school qualifications in senior secondary school. Such code shifts can have profound implications, such as causing previously successful agents to struggle or, in the case of music, reducing the take-up rate of qualifications.

Relational concepts

Specialization codes are but one species of legitimation code – there are more organizing principles conceptualized by LCT (Maton 2014). Moreover, these concepts are better understood within the wider context of the sociological approach of LCT, one which builds on Bourdieu’s field theory of practice. Space precludes here summarizing his accounts of how society comprises a series of relatively autonomous social fields of practice, how agents struggle to maximize their positions within the hierarchies of those fields, how they differentially acquire a ‘feel for the game’, how their past experiences are embodied in habituses that shape practices in relation to the evolving structures of the fields, and so forth. Space also precludes demonstrating the centrality of this understanding to LCT, though it will be recognized by anyone familiar with Bourdieu’s approach. More pertinent here are three characteristics of legitimation codes (including specialization codes) that explain how the concepts embody a relational gaze.

First, legitimation codes explore organizing principles – they reveal the *X*, enabling vertical relationality. Rather than using pre-constructed categories, offering ideal types or veneering descriptions, legitimation codes conceptualize the principles or structures *underlying* empirical realizations of dispositions, positions and practices.

Second, legitimation codes are ‘operative’ relational concepts – the *Xs* they reveal are relationally constructed. For example, when determining the specialization codes characterizing a set of practices, the strength of their epistemic relations is relative to strengths of epistemic relations of other possible practices and the strength of their social relations is relative to strengths of social relations of other possible practices. These relative strengths locate the practices on the *y*-axis and *x*-axis of the plane (Figure 1), giving their specialization code. Thus each instance is constructed as a ‘particular instance of the possible’ by showing both its position on the plane (and code) and the full range of possible positions (and codes) not occupied. The topology of the plane allows for an infinite number of relational positions. Legitimation codes are thus neither binary categories nor simply a typology. One can chart every instance of, say, interaction in a classroom or publications in a discipline as a scattergraph reaching across the plane, revealing both the dominant code and the diversity of codes at play. Similarly, one can chart change over time by tracing positions across the plane, such as movement from a knowledge code to a knower code.

Third, legitimation codes are not limited to a specific phenomenon, enabling horizontal relationality. They can be used to conceptualize the principles underlying habituses, configurations of capital, structures of a field, sets of practices, and numerous other phenomena, such as affordances of technology or attributes of institutions. Each can be coded using the same concepts, so each *X* can be related to other *Xs*. Thus, as mentioned above, one can show degrees of *code match* or *code*

clash, such as between the knower code of an agent's habitus and the knowledge code dominating a field. Moreover, by showing changes over time *within* the organizing principles of phenomena (field, capital, habitus, etc.), the concepts enable analysis of changes in relations *among* them. For example, one can reveal where an agent's experiences engender 'code shifting' of their habitus from knower code to knowledge code to match the dominant code of a field. By revealing *Xs* underlying all the phenomena highlighted by Bourdieu, the possibilities for deepening Bourdieusian explanations are manifold.

It should be clear that LCT concepts are complementary to, rather than in competition with, Bourdieu's tools. They offer a conceptual language that 'breaks' with substantialist description and embodies relational thinking, as Bourdieu argued. Indeed, by revealing the organizing principles of field, habitus, capital and practice they boost the explanatory potential of his concepts. LCT thereby enables field theory to achieve a deep relational analysis and so generate greater explanatory power. In short, Bourdieu highlighted what needs to be analysed and how; LCT provides additional tools for putting those intentions into practice. To illustrate how, I shall briefly discuss a major study by Rainbow Chen (2010) that used the concepts of specialization codes to explore the experiences of Chinese students at an Australian university.

A CASE FROM THE X-FILES

Most research into Chinese students who are overseas exhibits substantialism. Typically, studies focus on the ostensible attributes of students and neglect the educational environments they experience, leading to an essentialist and deficit model of students. In contrast, Chen's relational study analysed: (1) the dispositions to education brought by Chinese students; (2) the educational environments they encountered in Australia; and (3) their experiences and practices. In short, the study viewed agents' practice as resulting from the meeting of dispositions with positions and analysed each of their organizing principles. Data comprised: (1) focus groups with Chinese students across the university; (2) interviews with teaching staff and analysis of teaching materials; and (3) in-depth, recurrent interviews with seven Chinese students in a single faculty (41 hours total) through the course of their postgraduate learning. I can give only the briefest *précis* of this research; see Maton & Chen (2017) for a summary and Chen (2010) for the full study. Here I simply highlight how the concepts of specialization codes revealed the principles underlying student habituses, the environments they encountered, their experiences and resulting practices, and then brought these diverse phenomena together to generate explanatory power.

Student dispositions

When describing the experiences and expectations about education they brought from China, participants emphasized learning strongly bounded 'academic' knowledge; for example: 'the information in the textbook, decided by the teacher, was what the study unit was all about'.³ Teachers were described as experts in this content knowledge and teaching as explicit and clear procedures with strong control over selection, sequencing and pacing of knowledge. What was required of students in assessment was similarly explicit, unambiguous and concerned this knowledge. In short, the students described achievement as emphasizing specialized knowledge and

procedures: *relatively strong epistemic relations* (ER+). In contrast, students rarely considered their personal experiences as relevant to learning. They also emphasized the need to adopt self-effacing roles, such as asking questions only when sure they contribute to learning for the whole class. One described a cardinal rule of classroom behaviour as: ‘Don’t disturb the class. Even if your question is brilliant’. Similarly, academic achievement was said to require withholding one’s own views. Students stated that assessment should require textbook-based answers affording limited latitude and avoiding personal opinions; for example: ‘if I had written my answers on exams according to what I thought, not the book, they wouldn’t have been standard, right answers’. In short, education was described as downplaying personal experiences and views: *relatively weak social relations* (SR–).

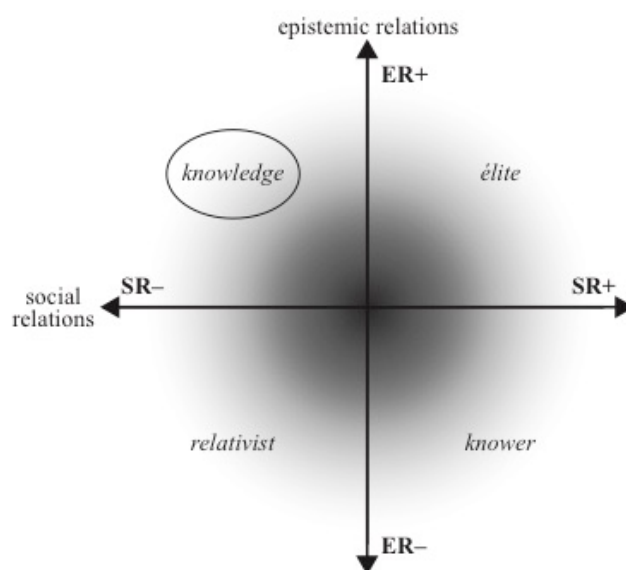


Figure 2: Knowledge-code dispositions

As Figure 2 highlights, the dispositions to education brought by the Chinese students embodied stronger epistemic relations and weaker social relations or a *knowledge code* (ER+, SR–). In other words, they valorized capital based on specialized knowledge, procedures and skills and devalorized capital based on personal attributes of knowers. This knowledge-code habitus was empirically realized in education contexts as valorization of: curriculum emphasizing academic knowledge and downplaying personal experience; pedagogy involving procedural delivery of teachers’ expert knowledge of subject content and downplaying personal dimensions of learning; and assessment comprising explicit and impersonal criteria for evaluating learners’ understanding (Chen 2010: 90–118).

Learning environments

The Chinese students were studying at an Australia university’s Faculty of Education but taught primarily online. In these learning environments teaching blurred all boundaries around ‘academic’ knowledge. There was little core content to the units and teachers encouraged students to treat reading materials as optional. They also denigrated as ‘instructivist’ any teaching where teachers select, sequence or pace knowledge. Instead, they advocated ‘constructivist’ pedagogy, described themselves as ‘facilitators’ or ‘co-learners’ and stressed they did not claim expert knowledge. Assessments similarly downplayed guidelines, comprising ‘authentic’ assessments that ‘situate the assignment in the context in which these people work and live’ and

eschew explicit evaluative criteria, ostensibly legitimating all forms of knowledge. The educational environment thus downplayed specialized knowledge, skills or procedures: *relatively weak epistemic relations* (ER-).

In contrast, teachers emphasized the value of personal experience and viewed students as already legitimate knowers. Students were expected to make their own decisions with minimal guidance about the relevance of readings to their own practices beyond education. They were also expected (though not compelled) to share personal experiences with other students in online discussions. Similarly, the ‘authentic’ assessments focused on students’ personal experiences. Thus, each student formed the basis of her or his own legitimacy; as one teacher described: ‘What I want to know is how much you, the student, can make the connections between your beliefs and your theory, your beliefs and your practices and can you share that with me and justify it’. However, this was not ‘anything goes’ – teachers valued a willingness to self-organise, participate and share their experiences in online discussions. The ideal student by which they measured work was thus independent, self-directed, confident and reflective. In sum, the educational environment based legitimacy on specific dispositions of knowers: *relatively strong social relations* (SR+).

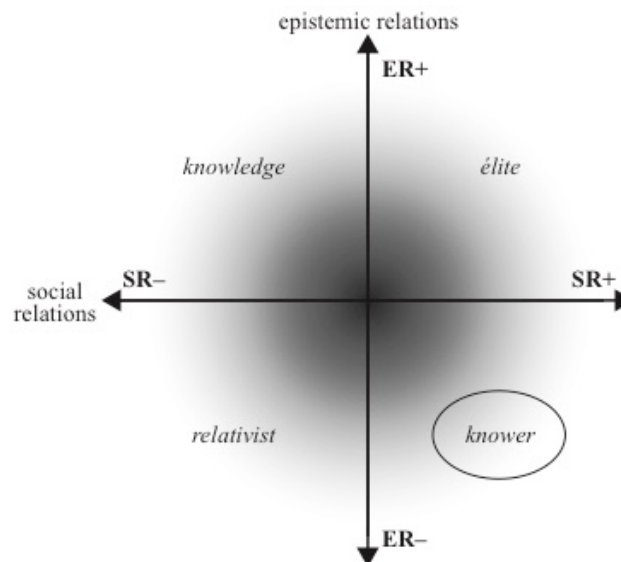


Figure 3: Knower-code position

As Figure 3 shows, the learning environments embodied weaker epistemic relations and stronger social relations or a *knower code* (ER-, SR+). Thus, this position in the academic field devalorized capital based on specialized knowledge, skills and procedures and valorized capital based on attributes of knowers. This knower-code position was empirically realized as: curriculum downplaying content knowledge and valorizing personal experience; pedagogy downplaying teacher involvement in favour of self-regulating learners creating their own understandings; and assessment where knowers evaluate themselves based on personal rather than shared criteria (Chen 2010: 119–158).

Student experience and strategies

Students with knowledge-code dispositions occupying a knower-code position creates the potential for a code clash. However, this is not to say the students viewed the learning environment as a knower code. As Bourdieu (2000) emphasized, one must

avoid the ‘scholastic fallacy’ of confusing the outcome of conceptual analysis with the viewpoint of participants. The experience of agents is mediated by the codes of their habituses. In this case, the Chinese students viewed the environment not as a *knower code* but as a *relativist code* (ER–, SR–), one lacking any basis for legitimacy.

On the one hand, students’ characterizations of the learning environment embodied weaker epistemic relations but viewed negatively. They experienced latitude concerning curriculum knowledge as a lack of structure and viewed constructivist pedagogy as an absence of structured guidance with teachers acting as like ‘tour guides’ or ‘passive assistants’. Almost all students expressed sentiments akin to the following:

I feel that teachers do not teach in online classes. They raise a lot of questions for us to discuss. What do they teach us? They teach us nothing. They ask us to think, but what if I can’t think of anything? I can sit there thinking all day, not sleeping at all, but I still can’t think of anything. So I don’t think they are teaching me.

Similarly, students described assessment criteria as lacking clarity and voiced frustration at being unable to obtain explicit instructions from teachers they approached for help.

On the other hand, students did not recognize the legitimacy of practices based on stronger social relations, such as sharing personal experience and peer discussion. They did not view their own experiences and beliefs as relevant to assignments and dismissed online discussions as ‘pointless’ because other students were not experts in content knowledge. This was compounded by the hands-off approach of teachers; for example: ‘Even if I got a reply from my classmate, it’s unlikely that the teacher would post a message afterwards to confirm whether what my classmate said was correct or not’. Accordingly, none felt part of an online learning community, repeatedly expressing isolation and doubting whether they were learning at all.

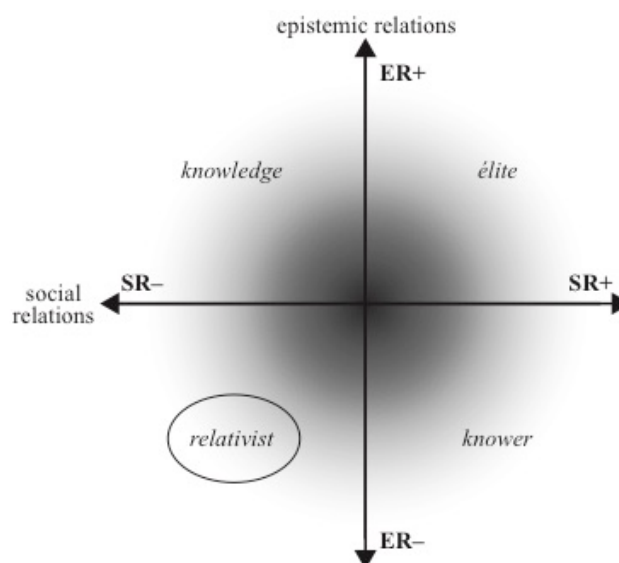


Figure 4: Relativist-code experiences

As discussed above, students with knowledge-code habituses (ER+, SR-) were seeking stronger epistemic relations and predisposed to downplay social relations. When encountering knower-code learning environments (ER-, SR+), they were frustrated by the weaker epistemic relations and unable to see the stronger social relations, viewing self-disclosure and peer discussion as not legitimate. As depicted in Figure 4, the Chinese students perceived the environment as embodying *both* weaker epistemic relations *and* weaker social relations: a *relativist code* (ER-, SR-). This code was experienced as a vacuum and related by students to feeling inferior, insecure, anxious, frustrated, helpless, guilty and depressed (Chen 2010: 159–209). In short, the students were like ‘fish out of water’ because their habitus code not only clashed with the environment code but also rendered its rules of the game invisible, leaving them floundering.

The students were unable to simply repeat their previous learning strategies from China, for their assignments were fundamentally different. However, they continued following their knowledge-code habituses through strategies such as treating previously learned academic knowledge as personal experience and synthesizing personal experiences from examples found in readings. In other words, they exhibited what Bourdieu (1984) termed ‘hysteresis’, whereby the habitus remains unchanged in new circumstances. Here, students’ coping strategies reflected their existing knowledge-code dispositions. This was not without cost: they described the courses and studying overseas as a waste of time and often blamed themselves for failing to discern the learning requirements.

CONCLUSION

Bourdieu argued that ‘the most vital task of social science ... is to establish as a fundamental norm of scientific practice the conversion of thought, the revolution of the gaze, the rupture with the preconstructed’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 251–2). This revolution involves a shift to relational thinking that horizontally relates dispositions, positions and practice through vertically revealing their organizing principles. In this chapter I argued that LCT offers concepts that complement Bourdieu’s tools in ways that embody this relational gaze. As the example above begins to illustrate, LCT enables analyses to reveal and relate the organizing principles (the *X*) underlying the diverse phenomena denoted by habitus, field, capital, practice, etc. In this case, the study analysed the specialization codes of student dispositions, teaching practices, student experiences, and student learning strategies.⁴ These codes were then related together to explain student experiences. The analysis conjectured that knowledge-code students (ER+, SR-) in knower-code environments (ER-, SR+) experience the weaker epistemic relations as an absence and do not see the stronger social relations as legitimate, generating relativist-code experiences (ER-, SR-) which they negotiate by continuing knowledge-code practices, with damaging emotional and educational effects. Put another way, LCT can add codes to each element of Bourdieu’s formula ‘[(habitus)(capital)] + field = practice’. One can summarize this study’s findings as: knowledge-code (habitus and capital)+ knower-code position = relativist-code experiences + knowledge-code strategies.

By using specialization codes the study was thereby able not only to argue that students felt like ‘fish out of water’ but also to show the *basis* of that mismatch: a code clash between knowledge-code habituses and the knower-code environment.

The study was also able to systematically show similarity or difference and, moreover, change between contexts and over time; for example, despite empirical differences between their learning strategies in China and Australia, analysis showed that students' habituses exhibited hysteresis by maintaining a knowledge code.

As the study illustrates, code concepts are not locked onto habitus, field or capital but rather applicable to all the phenomena highlighted by Bourdieu's tools. Similarly, the conjectures they enable are not locked into specific contexts. In this case, the explanation encompasses all knowledge-code agents in all knower-code environments, regardless of location, social background, form of practice, etc. LCT thus provides a means for exploring potentially 'general or invariant properties' of social fields. Moreover, using specialization codes allows this conjecture to avoid the terms 'Chinese', 'Western', 'Australian', 'constructivist', etc., illustrating how LCT enables the 'rupture' with pre-constructed categories essential to Bourdieu's gaze.

Finally, by embodying relational thinking, LCT can propose new possibilities. The study suggests ways to avoid the code clash, such as teachers making explicit the code underlying success and modelling the knower-code practices required of students. Indeed, as a growing body of teaching practice shows, teachers can use LCT as an explicit meta-language for making the 'rules of the game' visible to students (e.g. Clarence 2016, Kirk 2017).

LCT is far more than the concepts I illustrated here and these concepts are more complex than I have shown. Rather than simply an 'X', specialization codes are a combination of settings of two principles, each of which can exhibit a range of strengths. There are four main specialization codes, but each code can take many forms (Maton 2014). Moreover there are four other species of legitimation code, each revealing different dimensions of practice, such as temporality. Legitimation codes can embrace as much complexity as required by the object of study. Nonetheless, the example highlights how LCT can help fulfil the promise of field theory. By converting a relational gaze into relational concepts, the framework can enable others to complete that 'mental revolution' required to practice what Bourdieu preached. LCT can help us think like Bourdieu.

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¹ Bourdieu (1993) elsewhere described ‘the autonomous principle’ and ‘the heteronomous principle’, but the *X* that underlies these dichotomous ‘principles’ was not conceptualized. (Both this and degrees of distance from necessity have been conceptualized within LCT, as ‘autonomy codes’ and ‘semantic gravity’ respectively; Maton 2005, 2014).

² For LCT research, see: <http://www.legitimationcodetheory.com>.

³ All student and teacher quotes are from Chen (2010).

⁴ Analysis of teachers’ position in the university field would help explain their adoption of constructivist stances, but that was not the focus of this study. The aim was to analyse the organizing principles characterizing their position to explain the experiences of Chinese students.