

THREE

Habitus

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Introduction

Habitus is an enigmatic concept.¹ It is central to Bourdieu's distinctive sociological approach, "field" theory, and philosophy of practice, and key to his originality and his contribution to social science. It is probably the most widely cited of Bourdieu's concepts, and has been used in studies of an astonishing variety of practices and contexts, and is becoming part of the lexicon of a range of disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, education, cultural studies, philosophy and literary criticism. Yet, *habitus* is also one of the most misunderstood, misused and hotly contested of Bourdieu's ideas. It can be both revelatory and mystifying, instantly recognizable and difficult to define, straightforward and slippery. In short, despite its popularity, "*habitus*" remains anything but clear. In this chapter, I explore this complex concept. I suggest that its seemingly contradictory character flows from its principal roles in Bourdieu's sociology. In short, *habitus* does a lot of work in Bourdieu's approach. *Habitus* is intended to transcend a series of deep-seated dichotomies structuring ways of thinking about the social world. This would by itself make a full account of *habitus* a rich and multi-faceted discussion, touching on a wide-ranging series of profoundly significant issues and debates. However, the concept is also intended to provide a means of analysing the workings of the social world through empirical investigations. It is thus central not only to Bourdieu's way of thinking but also to his formidable range of substantive studies. Moreover, this highlights a third story: how the concept of *habitus*

has come to be understood and used, and misunderstood and misused, in empirical research by others. *Habitus* now also has a life beyond the work of Bourdieu. In this chapter I touch on these issues in turn.

The chapter begins by defining *habitus* and exploring its role in overcoming dichotomies in thinking. Secondly, I sketch the background to Bourdieu's formulation of *habitus* and its development through his empirical studies. No account of this concept can be comprehensive, for not only did Bourdieu employ the term in discussing a wide range of phenomena, but also once one thinks in terms of "habitus", its effects can be seen everywhere. Here, I give a sense of the analytical work to which Bourdieu puts the concept. Lastly, I consider what *habitus* can offer us, touching on how the concept can and should be developed to enhance its explanatory potential. My reference to "seeing the effects of habitus everywhere" represents a central theme of this chapter. *Habitus* is a concept that orients our ways of constructing objects of study, highlighting issues of significance and providing a means of thinking relationally about those issues. Its principal contribution is thus to shape *our* habitus, to produce a sociological gaze by helping to transform our ways of seeing the social world. This is, I argue, the basis of both misconceptions and its value since *habitus* is a crucial part of no less a task than attempting to enable a mental revolution in our understanding of the social world.

What is *habitus*?

The concept of *habitus* begins from both an experiential and a sociological conundrum. Experientially, we often feel we are free agents yet base everyday decisions on assumptions about the predictable character, behaviour and attitudes of others. Sociologically, social practices are characterized by regularities – working-class kids tend to get working-class jobs (as Willis 1977, put it), middle-class readers tend to enjoy middle-brow literature, and so forth – yet there are no explicit rules dictating such practices. These both raise fundamental questions which *habitus* is intended to resolve. As Bourdieu states, "all of my thinking started from this point: how can behaviour be regulated without being the product of obedience to rules?" (1994d: 65). In other words, Bourdieu asks how social structure and individual agency can be reconciled, and (to use Durkheim's terms) how the "outer" social, and "inner", self help to shape each other.

To explore how *habitus* addresses these questions requires first a brief excursion into rather theoretical terrain. Formally, Bourdieu defines habitus as a property of social agents (whether individuals, groups or institutions) that comprises a "structured and structuring structure" (1994d: 170). It is "structured" by one's past and present circumstances, such as family upbringing and educational experiences. It is "structuring" in that one's habitus helps to shape one's present and future practices. It is a "structure" in that it is systematically ordered rather than random or unpatterned. This "structure" comprises a system of dispositions which generate perceptions, appreciations and practices (1990c: 53). The term "disposition" is, for Bourdieu, crucial for bringing together these ideas of structure and tendency:

It expresses first the *result of an organizing action*, with a meaning close to that of words such as structure; it also designates a *way of being, a habitual state* (especially of the body) and, in particular, a *predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination*. (1977b: 214)

These dispositions or tendencies are *durable* in that they last over time, and *transposable* in being capable of becoming active within a wide variety of theatres of social action (1993a: 87). The habitus is thus both structured by conditions of existence and generates practices, beliefs, perceptions, feelings and so forth in accordance with its own structure.

The habitus, however, does not act alone. Bourdieu is not suggesting we are pre-programmed automatons acting out the implications of our upbringings. Rather, practices are the result of what he calls "an obscure and double relation" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992a: 126) or "an unconscious relationship" (Bourdieu 1993a: 76) between a habitus and a field. Formally, Bourdieu (1986c: 101) summarizes this relation using the following equation:

$$[(\text{habitus})/(\text{capital})] + \text{field} = \text{practice}$$

This equation can be unpacked as stating: practice results from relations between one's dispositions (habitus) and one's position in a field (capital), within the current state of play of that social arena (field). This concise formulation highlights something of crucial significance for understanding Bourdieu's approach: the interlocking nature of his three main "thinking tools" (Bourdieu & Wacquant

1989d: 50): *habitus*, *field* and *capital*. Practices are thus not simply the result of one's habitus but rather of *relations between* one's habitus and one's current circumstances.

Bourdieu describes this relation as the meeting of two evolving logics or histories (1993a: 46; 2000a: 150–51). In other words, the physical and social spaces we occupy are (like the habitus) structured, and it is the relation between these two structures that gives rise to practices. This “obscure relation” is further complicated by being one of “ontological complicity” (1982a: 47), because the field, as part of the ongoing contexts in which we live, structures the habitus, while at the same time the habitus is the basis for social agents' understanding of their lives, including the field:

On one side it is a relation of *conditioning*: the field structures the habitus . . . On the other side, it is a relation of knowledge or *cognitive construction*. Habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world.

(Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992a: 127)

When Bourdieu's “logic of practice” is set out in such abstract language (as Bourdieu often did himself), the reader may feel somewhat bewildered. It is therefore worthwhile revisiting the above definition in less formal terms. Simply put, *habitus* focuses on our ways of acting, feeling, thinking and being. It captures how we carry within us our history, how we bring this history into our present circumstances, and how we then make choices to act in certain ways and not others. This is an ongoing and active process – we are engaged in a continuous process of making history, but not under conditions entirely of our own making. Where we are in life at any one moment is the result of numberless events in the past that have shaped our path. We are faced at any moment with a variety of possible forks in that path, or choices of actions and beliefs. This range of choices depends on our current context (the position we occupy in a particular social field), but at the same time which of these choices are visible to us and which we do not see as possible are the result of our past journey, for our experiences have helped shape our vision. Which choices we choose to make, therefore, depends on the range of options available at that moment (thanks to our current context), the range of options visible to us, and on our dispositions (*habitus*), the embodied experiences of our journey. Our choices will then in turn shape our future possibilities, for any choice involves foregoing alternatives and sets us on a particular path that

further shapes our understanding of ourselves and of the world. The structures of the habitus are thus not “set” but evolve – they are durable and transposable but not immutable. At the same time, the social landscape through which we pass (our contextual fields) are themselves evolving according to their own logics (to which we contribute). Thus, to understand practices we need to understand both the evolving fields within which social agents are situated and the evolving habituses which those social agents bring to their social fields of practice (Bourdieu 1990c: 52–65; 1991a: 37–42).

Transcending dichotomies

Habitus is the link not only between past, present and future, but also between the social and the individual, the objective and subjective, and structure and agency. As this list suggests, a lot rests on its conceptualization – *habitus* aims to overcome a series of dichotomies that are worth briefly exploring in turn.

Habitus links the social and the individual because the experiences of one's life course may be unique in their particular *contents*, but are shared in terms of their *structure* with others of the same social class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, occupation, nationality, region and so forth. For example, members of the same social class by definition share structurally similar positions within society that engender structurally similar experiences of social relations, processes and structures. We are each a unique configuration of social forces, but these forces *are* social, so that even when we are being individual and “different” we do so in socially regular ways; or, as Bourdieu puts it, “personal style . . . is never more than a *deviation* in relation to the *style* of a period or class so that it relates back to the common style not only by its conformity . . . but also by the difference” (Bourdieu 1977b: 86).

Habitus conceptualizes the relation between the objective and subjective or “outer” and “inner” by describing how these social facts become internalized. Habitus is, Bourdieu states, “a socialized subjectivity” and “the social embodied” (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992a: 127, 128); it is, in other words, internalized structure, the objective made subjective.² It is also how the personal comes to play a role in the social – its dispositions underlie our actions that in turn contribute to social structure. Habitus thereby brings together both objective social structure and subjective personal experiences: “the *dialectic of the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality*” (1977b: 72).

Bourdieu also intends *habitus* to transcend the structure-agency dichotomy. This brings us to the limits of the metaphor of a "journey" I introduced above. Instead, Bourdieu often uses the analogy of a game and the notion of "strategy" to emphasize the active, creative nature of practices. Each social field of practice (including society as a whole) can be understood as a competitive game or "field of struggles" in which social agents strategically improvise in their quest to maximize their positions. Social agents do not arrive in a field fully armed with god-like knowledge of the state of play, the positions, beliefs and aptitudes of other social agents, or the full consequences of their actions. Rather, they enjoy a particular point of view on proceedings based on their positions, and they learn the tempo, rhythms and unwritten rules of the game through time and experience. Against accounts such as rational choice theory that suggest conscious choice or rational calculation as the basis of actions, Bourdieu posits the notion of a "feel for the game", one that is never perfect and that takes prolonged immersion to develop. This is a particularly *practical* understanding of practice – highlighted by Bourdieu's use of terms such as "practical mastery", "sense of practice" and "practical knowledge" – that he claims is missing from structuralist accounts and the objectivism of Lévi-Strauss. Bourdieu contrasts the abstract logic of such approaches, with their notion of practice as "rule-following", with the practical logic of social agents. Even this notion of a game, he warns, must be handled with caution:

You can use the analogy of the game in order to say that a set of people take part in a rule-bound activity, an activity which, without necessarily being the product of obedience to rules, obeys *certain regularities* . . . Should one talk of a rule? Yes and no. You can do so on condition that you distinguish clearly between *rule* and *regularity*. The social game is regulated, it is the locus of certain regularities. (Bourdieu 1990c: 64)

To understand practice, then, one must relate these *regularities* of social fields to the *practical logic* of social agents; their "feel for the game" is a feel for these regularities. The source of this practical logic is the habitus. "The habitus as the feel for the game", Bourdieu argues, "is the social game embodied and turned into a second nature" (1994d: 63). This link to social structure enables Bourdieu to emphasize creativity without succumbing to the voluntarism and subjectivism that, he argues, characterizes the existentialism of

Sartre. Thus, Bourdieu claims to go beyond the opposition between structuralism and hermeneutics, between providing an objective account of social regularities and a subjective focus on the meaning-making of social agents.

The emphasis on the situated, practical nature of practice also underlies Bourdieu's strictures against confusing the model of reality with the reality of the model (see 1977b: 29). For Bourdieu, there is always a danger, by virtue of the external, distanced vision of the scholarly gaze, of turning logical terms of analysis into reality – concepts as reified phenomena (see 1994d: 61). This is to mistake social regularities observed sociologically for the basis of practice in everyday life – the view of the game from above is not the same as the view of participants on the ground. Imagine, for example, the differences in form and function between a map of an underground railway system that, through its colour-coded straight and curved lines neatly intersecting stations, shows the *relative* positions of stations, with a map of the actual geographical positions of those stations or, even more so, with the experience of travelling on the system. Put another way, there are fundamental differences between "the *theoretical* aims of theoretical understanding and the practical and directly concerned aims of practical understanding" (*ibid.*: 60) that must be overcome if social practice is to be understood fully. The concept of *habitus* is intended to do just that.

The habitus is thus, for Bourdieu, the crucial mediating link between a series of dualisms often portrayed by other approaches as dichotomous, and brings together the existence of social regularities with the experience of agency. Crucially, in doing so, *habitus* is intended to encourage us to think relationally: Bourdieu emphasizes "relations between" rather than "either/or", where each dimension being related is itself defined relationally. Discussion of transcending dichotomies is, however, simply intellectual gymnastics unless one can *use* the concepts to understand and explain the social world. I thus now turn to consider why Bourdieu developed the concept of *habitus* and its explanatory power in his empirical studies.

A history of *habitus*

A history of the issues the concept of *habitus* aims to resolve would be the history of philosophical thinking itself, for these questions are perennial. A wide variety of thinkers have also suggested similar concepts. The related notion of "habit", for example, appears in the

work of James (1976), Garfinkel (1967), Schurz (1972) and Berger and Luckmann (1967). Among thinkers who predate Bourdieu in describing something akin to "habitus" are Aristotle, Ockham, Aquinas, Merleau-Ponty, Husserl and Elias, as well as Durkheim and Weber.³ Bourdieu himself also cites Hegel's "ethos", Husserl's "Habituallität" and Marcel Mauss's "hexis" as precursor ideas to his own conception (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992a: 121). A particularly direct influence was Panofsky's *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (1957), which Bourdieu translated into French.⁴

Bourdieu's use of the term *habitus* deliberately aims to break with such past accounts – "I said habitus so as not to say habit" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992a: 122). The key difference is that Bourdieu's *habitus* emphasizes the underlying structures of practices, i.e. acts are underpinned by a *generative principle*. As Bourdieu explained:

Why did I revive that old word? Because with the notion of *habitus* you can refer to something that is close to what is suggested by the idea of habit, while differing from it in one important respect. The *habitus*, as the word implies, is that which one has acquired, but which has become durably incorporated in the body in the form of permanent dispositions. So the term constantly reminds us that it refers to something historical, linked to individual history, and that it belongs to a genetic mode of thought, as opposed to existentialist modes of thought . . . Moreover, by *habitus* the Scholastics also meant something like a property, a *capital*. (1993a: 86)

In other words, Bourdieu argues that previous accounts tend to focus on regular practices or habits rather than the principles underlying and generating those practices. What may be "invisible relationships" to the untrained gaze "because they are obscured by the realities of ordinary sense-experience" (1984: 22), are, to Bourdieu, crucial to understanding the social world. This "genetic" or "relational" mode of thinking excavates beneath the surface of empirical phenomena to hypothesize the existence of a generative principle, the *habitus*, which is more than the practices to which it gives rise – it can be possessed and has its own properties and tendencies.

This conception of *habitus* evolved through the course of Bourdieu's writings. As Grenfell (2004b) highlights, the notion of *habitus* occurs in his early work on Béarn farmers to describe their habits and physical actions (Bourdieu 1962b; 2002b). Though using the term "habitat", Bourdieu also places the idea at the heart of *The*

Inheritors (Bourdieu & Passeron 1979b [1964]) to account for different take-up rates of university education between social classes. *Habitus* is more formally defined in *Reproduction* (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977a [1970]), *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977b [1972]) and *The Logic of Practice* (1990c [1980]) and consequently becomes both more integrated within a broader theoretical framework and more widely applicable. Over time, the concept also broadened out from a cognitive focus to embrace more the corporeal (primarily through the concept of *hexis*), and from emphasizing socialized forms of actions to highlighting the creativity of practice. Through this development, *habitus* has been a lynchpin of analyses of a wide variety of social arenas. While a potted summary of these studies is beyond my scope here, Bourdieu insisted the value of his concepts lies in their explanatory power in concrete empirical analyses, so it is worthwhile illustrating the ways Bourdieu puts *habitus* to work in these studies.

Habitus at work

Central to how *habitus* works as an explanatory tool is the relationship between habitus and field. As outlined above, both habitus and field are relational structures and it is the *relation between* these relational structures that provides the key for understanding practice. The two structures are homologous – they represent objective and subjective realizations of the same underlying social logic – and mutually constituting, in that each helps shape the other. Crucially, they are also both evolving, so relations between habitus and field are ongoing, dynamic and partial: they do not match perfectly, for each has its own internal logic and history. This allows for the relationship between the structure of a field and the habituses of its members to be one of varying degrees of fit or mismatch (see Chapter 8 on *hysteresis*). Imagine, for example, a social situation in which you feel or anticipate feeling awkward, out of your element, like a "fish out of water". You may decide not to go, to declare it as "not for the likes of me", or (if there already) to make your excuses and leave. In this case the structuring of your habitus does not match that of the social field. Conversely, imagine a situation where you feel comfortable, at ease, like a "fish in water". Here your habitus matches the logic of the field, you are attuned to the *doxa*, the unwritten "rules of the game" underlying practices within that field. This relationship between habitus and field, crudely conveyed here, is central to

Bourdieu's accounts of a wide range of social fields of practice and, in particular, their role in social reproduction and change.

In *The Inheritors* (1979b) and *Reproduction* (1977a), for example, Bourdieu and Passeron address why social agents from middle-class backgrounds are more likely, and those from working-class backgrounds are less likely, to attend university. They describe how innumerable stimuli during upbringing shape the outlooks, beliefs and practices of social agents in ways that impact upon their educational careers. Rather than the educational system blocking access to social agents from non-traditional backgrounds, these social agents relegate themselves out of the system, seeing university as "not for the likes of me". Conversely, middle-class social agents are more likely to consider university education as a "natural" step, as part of their inheritance. When at university they are also more likely to feel "at home", for the underlying principles generating practices within the university field – its unwritten "rules of the game" – are homologous to their own habituses. Bourdieu argues that people thereby internalize, through a protracted process of conditioning, the objective chances they face – they come to "read" the future and to choose the fate that is also statistically the most likely for them. Practices within a given situation are, Bourdieu argues, conditioned by expectation of the outcome of a given course of action, which is in turn based, thanks to the habitus, on experience of past outcomes.

Through such studies, Bourdieu shows how the shaping of our habitus may provide us with a practical mastery or "feel for the game" but not for all games equally; our past and ongoing conditions of existence enable more of a "feel" for some games than others, and for particular ways of playing those games. Our aspirations and expectations, our sense of what is reasonable or unreasonable, likely or unlikely, our beliefs about what are the obvious actions to take and the natural way of doing them, are all for Bourdieu neither essential nor natural but rather conditioned by our habituses and are thereby a mediated form of arbitrary social structure (see 2000a). It is our material conditions of existence that generate our innumerable experiences of possibilities and impossibilities, probable and improbable outcomes, that in turn shape our unconscious sense of the possible, probable and, crucially, desirable for us. We learn, in short, our rightful place in the social world, where we will do best given our dispositions and resources, and also where we will struggle (see 1984: 471). In this way, we achieve "subjective expectations of objective probabilities" (1990c: 59): what is likely becomes what we actively choose. Social agents thereby come to gravitate towards

those social fields (and positions within those fields) that best match their dispositions and to try to avoid those fields that involve a field-habitus clash.

In other major studies of education (see Bourdieu 1988a, 1996b; Bourdieu *et al.* 1994a), cultural consumption (1984), language (1991a), the creation and canonization of art (1993b; 1996a), among a myriad other foci, Bourdieu repeatedly addresses these questions of how and why people come to be thinking and acting as they do, and how these actions and beliefs impact upon social reproduction and change. The notion of degrees of what I have called here field-habitus match or clash is not only crucial to the processes outlined above but also to how these processes are normally rendered invisible to the social agents involved. As "fish in water", social agents are typically unaware of the supporting, life-affirming water, the match between their habituses and the fields in which they flourish or feel at ease, and how they come to be in these contexts. Moreover, by virtue of field-habitus match, social agents share the *doxa* of the field, the assumptions that "go without saying" and that determine the limits of the doable and the thinkable. As Bourdieu states: "The most profitable strategies are usually those produced, on the hither side of all calculation and in the illusion of the most 'authentic' sincerity, by a habitus objectively fitted to the objective structures" (1977b: 214). Social agents typically embrace their fate and "misrecognize" the arbitrary for the essential. The habitus "continuously transforms necessity into virtue by instituting 'choices' which correspond to the condition of which it is the product" (1984: 170). Revealing the hidden workings of habitus is thus, for Bourdieu, a kind of "socio-analysis", a political form of therapy enabling social agents to understand more fully their place in the social world.

The relation between habitus and the social world is, however, not always simply one of degrees of match or class – they can become "out of synch". Because its dispositions are embodied, the habitus develops a momentum that can generate practices for some time after the original conditions which shaped it have vanished. Moreover, the primary socialization in the family is for Bourdieu deeply formative and, though the habitus is shaped by ongoing contexts, this is slow and unconscious – our dispositions are not blown around easily on the tides of change in the social worlds we inhabit. One can thus have situations where the field changes more rapidly than, or in different directions to, the habitus of its members. The practices of social agents can then seem anachronistic, stubbornly resistant or ill-informed. This "hysteresis effect" (1977a: 78–9) is central, for

example, to Bourdieu's analyses of the economic practices of peasants in Algeria (Bourdieu *et al.* 1963; Bourdieu & Sayad 1964; Bourdieu 1979a; 2000e)⁵ (see Chapter 8 for further discussion). Under French colonialism, the traditional peasant society of Algeria was submitted to "a kind of *historical acceleration* which caused two forms of economic organization, normally separated by a gap of several centuries and making contradictory demands on their participants, to coexist" (2000e: 18). The money economy imported and imposed by colonialism demanded of peasants new attitudes towards time and a monetary rationalism. This "properly economic habitus" (*ibid.*: 29) involves viewing economic transactions as having their own logic separate from those of ordinary social relationships, especially between kin. However, peasants maintained for some time their traditional modes of acting. This was not, Bourdieu argued, irrational, stubborn or conservative. Rather, peasant dispositions were forged in a different social world; though this world was being transformed, these durable dispositions could not be expected to change at the same rate, leading to *hysteresis* before these practices slowly adapted and changed in a process not of "purely mechanical and passive forced accommodation" but of "creative reinvention" (1979a: 4). That habitus and field, our dispositions and material conditions of existence, have a relative autonomy from one another thereby not only enables Bourdieu to proclaim to transcend such philosophical dichotomies as individual-social but also, more crucially, it provides the basis of the explanatory power of his analyses of social agents in empirical social worlds.

Habitus – beyond Bourdieu

Thus far I have sketched how, with *habitus*, Bourdieu aims both to transcend philosophical dualisms and to offer epistemologically powerful accounts of the social world. The question remains, though, as to what the concept of *habitus* offers us *beyond* Bourdieu. The principal legacy of *habitus*, I would argue, is its crucial role in a wider project. Bourdieu proclaimed:

The task is to produce, if not a "new person", then at least a "new gaze", a sociological eye. And this cannot be done without a genuine conversion, a *metanoia*, a mental revolution, a transformation of one's whole vision of the social world.

(Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992a: 251)

Habitus is a key part of Bourdieu's lens through which he sees the social world. As noted, this new sociological "gaze" is underpinned by a *relational mode* of thought. Relation is the essence of *habitus*. Where many approaches reduce practice to one dimension of a dichotomy, such as either the individual or the social, and thus dissolve dualisms through reductionism, *habitus* provides a means of maintaining but relating such dualisms. Moreover, it compares favourably to other similarly proclaimed concepts. Giddens's notion of "structuration" (1984), for example, brings together structure and agency but at the cost of their analytical integrity, disabling the capacity to capture either (see Archer 1995, 1996). With *habitus*, Bourdieu aims to allow structure and agency (and, likewise, the individual and social, "outer" and "inner", etc.) their analytical integrity, but also to relate them to each other. As stated above, the concept of *habitus* is itself also relational. As the examples outlined here show, practice is not reducible to *habitus* but rather a phenomenon emergent from relations between social agents' habituses and their contextual social fields. For Bourdieu, habitus, capital and field are necessarily interrelated, both conceptually and empirically (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992a: 96–7n). To talk of *habitus* without *field* and to claim to analyse "habitus" without analysing "field" is thus to fetishize habitus, abstracting it from the very contexts which give it meaning and in which it works. The habitus is a relational structure whose significance lies in its relations with relational fields. Thus, the concept of *habitus* and the object it aims to conceptualize are both thoroughly relational in intention. With the concept, Bourdieu is thus encouraging us to adopt a relational mode of thinking that goes beyond surface empirical practices to excavate their underlying structuring principles. *Habitus* thereby aims to shape our habitus – it aims to help transform our ways of seeing the social world.

If the principal contribution *habitus* makes is to shape our habitus, this is also the basis for how it may be developed beyond Bourdieu. The concept has been subject to considerable philosophical debate. However, my focus here is its capacity for enabling empirical research. This follows Bourdieu's own strictures about its value – his theoretical framework represents, he says, "a *temporary construct which takes shape for and by empirical work*" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1989d: 50, original emphasis). As an orientating idea, *habitus* works by drawing attention to something significant and offering a way of thinking about it. It is a powerful heuristic, thanks partly to its general nature – once one thinks in terms of *habitus* one sees the effects of habitus everywhere. Thus, *habitus* can be and is

being used to analyse a wide variety of issues and areas across a number of disciplines – it is highly applicable and an account of the uses of *habitus* by other researchers would be a book in itself (for examples, see Fowler 2000; Grenfell & Kelly 2004; Grenfell & Hardy 2007). As a concept for empirical research, however, this strength of *habitus* can also create difficulties.

Habitus does a lot of work in Bourdieu's approach and can be applied at macro, meso and micro levels. It can, though, be difficult to define. As one commentator argues, "this very appealing conceptual versatility sometimes renders ambiguous just what the concept actually designates empirically" (Swartz 1997:109). More important is the question of the structure of the habitus. This is to ask: if *habitus* highlights a generative structure, then what is the internal structure of that structure? According to Bourdieu, practices are generated by the habitus and so all practices offer evidence of the structures of the habitus that generate them. The task for the researcher is to analyse practices so that the underlying structuring principles of the habitus are revealed. However, empirically, one does not "see" a habitus but rather the *effects* of a habitus in the practices and beliefs to which it gives rise. The structure of the habitus must be captured by excavating beneath practices to capture its relational structure as one among a range of possible structures. The questions for research are thus: what particular structure of the habitus is in play here compared to other possible habitus structures?; and how can we tell when that habitus has changed, varied or remained the same?

Here, we reach the limits of the concept as currently formulated. Raymond Boudon (1971: 51, 102) distinguishes between *intentional* relational concepts, that aim to construct an object of study relationally, and the *operative* implementation of that intention. The latter requires concepts that can analyse phenomena as relational systems. As a number of sympathetic critiques have argued, to achieve operative relational concepts requires being able to state the internal structure of a habitus *separate* from a description of the practices it gives rise to; for example, as structure X among a range of possible structurings W, X, Y, Z.⁶ Without this ability, there is a danger of circularity and *ad hoc* explanation. For example, Bourdieu himself acknowledged that one could state "why does someone make petty-bourgeois choices? Because he has a petty bourgeois habitus!" and claimed to be "keenly aware of this danger" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992a: 129). However, vigilance is one thing, a conceptual means of avoiding the possibility of circularity is another. Without a clear means for others to identify the "X" then, as Basil Bernstein puts it,

"once an illustration is challenged or an alternative interpretation given, there are problems" (Bernstein 1996: 136). This is not to say that *habitus* is deficient or that Bourdieu's own analyses are not convincing, but simply highlights how the explanatory potential of the concept can be strengthened further to enable the kinds of epistemologically powerful accounts of the social world Bourdieu aimed to provide. For, as it stands, *habitus* is open to misuse and misunderstandings when used in research.

Too often, for example, in educational research (where *habitus* has often been used), the relational construction of the object of study that Bourdieu emphasized as essential to his approach has been eschewed in favour of using *habitus* as a synonym for social background or socialization. Studies purporting to employ Bourdieu's approach sometimes simply point to practices, such as students' attitudes to education or choice of university, and proclaim they show the effects of habitus. *Habitus* is thereby stripped of its relational structure, its crucial relationship with field in generating practices and its dynamic qualities. Used alone, *habitus* is often little more than theoretical icing on an empirical cake. The concept can be removed from such accounts without any loss of explanatory power. A second effect is the tendency for *habitus* to proliferate adjectives. This adjectival addition (e.g. "emotional habitus") often compensates for the lack of an analysis of the field – the adjective highlights the area of social life in which its effects are being proclaimed – or to denote the kind of social agent being studied (e.g. "institutional habitus"). The proliferation of *habitus* illustrates the versatility of the concept. It also reflects a temptation to decontextualize *habitus* from the approach that gives the concept meaning and to adopt instead an empiricist lens – naming parts of a *habitus* distinguishes empirical features of practices rather than their underlying generative principles. At this point we are back to a pre-Bourdieuian understanding of habitus. Such temptations, I am suggesting, highlight the need to elaborate *habitus* by developing a means for translating between the theoretical and the empirical, i.e. for identifying the "X".⁷

Nonetheless, the concept remains extremely valuable. In an article responding to dismissals of its value, Roy Nash asked of *habitus*, "is it all worth the candle?". He concluded:

If it takes the best part of a decade to make sense of the core concepts of Bourdieu's theory only to find one has no more ability to understand the world than one did before, then

perhaps not. Yet the struggle to work with Bourdieu's concepts . . . is worthwhile, just because to do so forces one to think.

(Nash 1999: 185)

I would add that it is worthwhile not only because they force one to think but also because they offer a fruitful way of thinking. As Bernstein argues, *habitus* is "something good to think with, or about" and alerts us "to new possibilities, new assemblies, new ways of seeing relationships" (1996: 136). *Habitus* is to Bourdieu's approach what *power-knowledge* is to Foucault's or *coding orientation* to Bernstein's – once one has internalized the idea to the extent that it is part of one's way of seeing and thinking about the social world, it becomes second nature. If *habitus* is the social embodied, *habitus* can become the sociological embodied. Thinking in terms of *habitus* becomes part of one's habitus. When the concept is in one's intellectual marrow in this way it achieves the "metanoia" Bourdieu hoped to enable. This is its strength and a considerable achievement. It is not, however, the end of the story. *Habitus*, as its evolution through Bourdieu's work shows and like the very thing it aims to capture, should not be considered as fixed or eternal but rather an evolving idea. The development of *habitus* to become a fully operative relational concept represents the next, exciting stage for an evolving conceptualization of habitus.

Notes

1. To avoid eliding discussion of the concept with that of the object it aims to conceptualize, I use italics (*habitus*) to denote the concept and non-italics (habitus) to denote its referent.
2. Bourdieu further emphasized the embodiment of social structures with the notion of *hexis corporeal* – one's past is enscribed onto the body in terms of gait, posture, stance, stride, facial expressions, and so forth (1985d; 1990c: 80–97). This highlights yet another dichotomy Bourdieu aims to transcend, that of the body and mind.
3. On the history of "habit" see Carmic (1986); for accounts of the history of "*habitus*" see Bourdieu (1985d), Héran (1987), Nash (1999) and Rist (1984).
4. Bourdieu took Panofsky's argument that a way of thinking (Scholasticism), itself shaped by the socio-cultural conditions of the time, gave rise to the Gothic style of architecture, and extended this argument to contemporary education. Scholastic thought is, he suggested, a product of the organizational and ideological structure of the field of education, which itself is conditioned by socio-historical conditions. The school thus acts as a "habit-forming force" that gives rise to "the cultivated habitus" (see Bourdieu 1971a: 184).

5. See Bourdieu (1988a) for another analysis of *hysteresis*, this time explaining the student revolts in France in the late 1960s in terms of a mismatch between the aspirations of an expanding student population and the objective probabilities of entering the job market at the same level as in the past under conditions of expansion-fuelled credential inflation.

6. See for example, Bernstein (1996), LiPuma (1993), Maton (2000; 2003; 2005) and Moore (2004).

7. One means of doing so is to use Bernstein's notions of "coding orientation" to describe different possible structurings of the habitus and of "codes" to conceptualize different possible structurings of fields (Bernstein 1975; 1996). The potential for the approaches of Bourdieu and Bernstein to complement one another has yet to be fully explored, and has not been helped by intellectual "turf wars" that exaggerate their differences and are more concerned with status distinctions in the sociological field than with building powerful knowledge of the social world (Maton 2005).