

# Bourdieu's Theory: Critical Discussion on How Leaders lead in a Particular Organizational Culture

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## Abstract

This paper aims to critically examines the Bourdieu's theory of practice and practical examples and how the leaders can lead in a particular cultural context. In this paper we will critically analyze how leaders can lead most effectively in a particular cultural context and situation. To prove this, we have to base our thinking on Bourdieu's theory of practice that we are going to present and explain first along with the culturalist theory which has a lot of drawbacks. This will show how the leaders in a particular cultural context the think and their state of mind to better define the situation. Finally, a concrete example about the educational leadership taking the schools and principal in consideration will be given to illustrate the critical thinking we have been through in this paper and end to a conclusion with the ways leaders can lead most effectively in the cultural and social context. Bourdieu describes his work as 'constructivist structuralism' or 'structuralist constructivism'. Hence, we see this paper will analyze and will keep facts in the educational habitus and with examples in educational field.

**Keywords:** Bourdieu's theory, habitus, field, capital, culture, educational example, leadership.

## Introduction

As we know leadership is a part of the complex figure of management. Leadership is about behavior and not the attributes. Leadership is about seeking the opportunities and working towards them to take the organization to productive and improved changes (Kotter, 2017). We can study the behaviour of a leader by the 'Theory of Practice' given by the French Sociologist and Philosopher Pierre Bourdieu whose works have left a remarkable mark in the field of sociology and how his contributions have benefitted the business and management literature. He introduces the concepts of Habitus, Capital, Social Field and Structures developing the basic components of the theory of practice. Bourdieu with his social theory solves the issues of the vast culturalist theory which does not have precision and ignores the effective relationship between the culture and the environment it exists (Jackson, 2008) by introducing 'habitus' and 'field' providing an understanding of what culture is and how it determines social interactions at all levels.

In this paper we will critically analyze how leaders can lead most effectively in a particular cultural context and situation. To prove this, we have to base our thinking on Bourdieu's theory of practice that we are going to present and explain first along with the culturalist theory which has a lot of drawbacks. This will show how the leaders in a particular cultural context the think and their state of mind to better define the situation. Finally, a concrete example about the educational leadership taking the schools and principal in consideration will be given to illustrate the critical thinking we have been through in this paper and end to a conclusion with the ways leaders can lead most effectively in the cultural and social context.

## Aim of the study

To critically analyse the Bourdieu's theory and explaining how leaders lead in a particular organisational culture, specifically talking about educational organisational culture and different aspects leading to the analysis of the theory.



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### Habitus

Bonnewitz says "Habitus is the central concept in Bourdieu's sociology" (Walther, 2014). It refers to the dispositions, created and reformulated with the help of "objective structures and personal history" (Harker, Mahar and Wilkes, 1990) that is acquired by the values, tastes and preferences, background, educational history. Habitus is durable and is always in a "state of evolution" (Jackson, 2008). It is composed of unconscious and conscious learned experience. It is the strategy to handle the "unforeseen and ever-changing situations" (Walther, 2014). The notion of habitus explains how the agents in a structure act properly and intentionally "without being aware" to what they are doing is right (Strand, 2001). Bourdieu gives a stress on the relationship of agency and structure that is exhibited in habitus. And describes habitus as

"structured structures" which tells us that habitus is a result of social structures and structures practices producing social fields (Walther, 2014).

### Field

The second main Bourdieuan concept is 'FIELD'. Bourdieu describes the field as the domains of "production, circulation, exchange and appropriation of goods and services, knowledge or status" (Swartz and Edgerton, 2014). Grenfell and James state, "if habitus brings into focus the subjective end of the equation, field focuses on the objective" (Ozbilgin and Tatli, 2005). It is the limit for which the "social actors compete (Jackson, 2008). The rank that an actor hold determines the limits of "social mobility within a social field" that self-proclaims the rules for them called DOXA. And Doxa tells us about our possibilities (Walther, 2014). hence, fields are like games wherein to enter you require a conscious or unconscious acceptance with the rules for the players who must possess a tacit knowledge about the game.

### Capital

For The agents to enter the playground they need to provide a specific quantity and the particular sort of resources that can be put at stake to enter a social field, the resources required are called as Capital (Walther, 2014). It is a "basis of domination" and is "convertible" (Harker, Mahar and Wilkes, 1990). Capital is thus referred to as the "Currency of Power" within a field. And the players or agents understand its importance by the help of their habitus (Jackson, 2008), Bourdieu divides capital into 4 categories- Economical, Cultural, Social and Symbolic Capital. These capitals can be acquired by a person's revenue, family values, education and reputation and recognition. Therefore, a certain type of capital maybe important in a specific field and indecisive in the other and these conversions of capital are the continuous struggles by the actors to strategize the field in their favour (Jackson, 2008).

### Cultural Theory and Bourdieu's solution to its drawbacks

To understand the whole approach, 'Culture' is considered to be the base. Bourdieu proposes the 'generative structuralism' to understand the 'social structures' and the habitus of the agents who are a part of these structure (Harker, Mahar and Wilkes,

1990). The 'cultural turn' stresses on the practices and representations of human behaviour (Jackson, 2008). "Culturalist international history explores the way constructions of national identity that are based on ethnicity, race, religion and gender shape the way actors perceive and respond to international politics" (Jackson, 2008). Bourdieu describes his work as 'constructivist structuralism' or 'structuralist constructivism' where in easy words 'Structuralism' stands for the interpreting and analyzing the human behaviour and culture and 'Constructivism' stands for all the Practical Proofs provided for a theory. Bourdieu gives us conventional views on society and culture- namely, structuralist and implicitly argues for an "improved unison and dialogue between traditions" (Ozbilgin and Tatli, 2005). He has taken "the conceptual plane of structure and habitus" (Ozbilgin and Tatli, 2005) for the power relations.

### Theory of Practice and Its Implementation

Taking all of these components of Bourdieu's theory, we infer that [(habitus)(capital)+field] = practice. Bourdieu's theory explains the social hierarchies. "The core of the method is the process of the internalization of externality and externalization of internality" (Harker, Mahar and Wilkes, 1990). To explain leadership theory and the relationship between the Bourdieu's theory and the traits of leaders we take the example of Educational Leadership in existence which has been utilizing "the concepts of leadership traits, the situational context of leadership practices and transformational practices". Wherein the Habitus enables us to discuss about the characteristics and personal influence along with the relation to specific social structure and embodied dispositions. And the Field enables us to discuss the conditions of leadership, in this case the school as the structured social space which has its own properties and power relations overlapping and interrelating with economic, political, power and other fields. In other words, it is the educational game where "the players in the game (field) compete over what is at stake (capital)" (Eacott, 2010).

### Leadership and Leaders in Education (Based on Bourdieu's Theory of Practice)

"Educational leadership is a field of practice and a field of research and scholarship" (Lingard and Christie, 2003) and Formal leaders in education are Principals who are on top of hierarchy and are managed by the system and policy frames. We can apply Bourdieu's theory and concepts to leadership practices in schools by recognizing the educational leadership habitus and the product of the field of educational management and leadership (Lingard and Christie, 2003). Taking Formal leadership in consideration the Principal in a school is in a specific point within an educational field where the field seems to have its own hierarchies and logics of practicing their work. Principal as a leader is between the 'policy producing apparatus and the practices of schooling' (Lingard and Christie, 2003)

Hence, principal's leadership habitus is theorized by Stephen Ball (1994) as an interaction between the context of policy and context of production which are further influenced directly or

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indirectly. His job is to present the best possible image of his school in systems 'framed by market views' (Lingard and Christie, 2003) sitting in between the school and community with different areas of practices. And the principal is also within the educational leadership by the professional association and academic association of theory and research (Lingard and Christie, 2003). The various types of capitals taken into consideration are cultural capital based on cultural forms and formal qualifications. Social capital helps in creating networks and communicates with the community.

Taking the example of Educational leadership for Parental involvement in an Asian Context by ESTHER SUI-CHU HO in account, Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital' and 'principal's habitus' are the lot more powerful concepts in the 'fields' of home and school where the Social practice is Parental Involvement (Ho, 2009) theoretically. In this study of Hong Kong particularly "the principal's habitus appears to be a major determinant of parental involvement, especially since Chinese parents generally trust schools and respect school professionals". As a result, "leadership habitus of principals appears to be one of the most important factors affecting the extent of parental involvement in schools". Hong Kong schools are constant with this 'deep structure and culture' (Walker, 2004) (Ho, 2009).

Esther conducted interviews and found in the practical perspective that the principal's habitus/leadership towards the parental involvement needs to be put within the contexts of society and education. The major factors affecting the principal's habitus which influence their strategies and practices for home-school collaboration are their beliefs and the past interactions and experiences with the parents considering the cultural capital. This study revealed three types of leadership approaches for the principals- bureaucratic, utilitarian and communitarian. 'Bureaucratic approach' shows that parents' involvement in the concerns of school is of minor importance resulting in a distant relationship between parents and teachers. 'Utilitarian leadership approach' shows that parents are a resource which can be used to provide school with support and in all praises about it. The principals of this category filter the parents who fulfill this concept. And the last category was 'Communitarian Leadership Approach' where the principals consider parents as an essential part of the school and the parents have a special bond of mutual trust (Ho, 2009).

Hence, by this example where taking the cultural capital and principal's leadership habitus in consideration to practice the parental involvement we conclude that different strategies into the parental involvement form the differences in the principal's leadership habitus approaches (Ho, 2009).

### Criticism

Some researchers say that the concept of habitus is too vague to be quantified. There are a lot of problems to bring in operation the habitus, capital, field, practice for research methods (Swartz and Edgerton, 2014). Staff Callewaert stated that the theory of Practice ignores the ability of change

through reflection (Strand, 2001). Mohr criticizes Bourdieu because according to him, his model ignores the 'divergent dispositions' that one may possess and the social field in which the positions are taken is 'largely structured by macro influences' (Ozbilgin and Tatli, 2005). Even after this harsh criticism what Bourdieu offers is a way of dealing with the societies and tells us of how to ask questions (Harker, Mahar and Wilkes, 1990). He tells us about culture in detail and provides a framework for placing culture in context (Jackson, 2008). And as usual his concepts of habitus, field and capital are the famous tools to understand the process of social practice by humans in a particular culture according to their respective habits and behaviour.

### Conclusion

In the above example we see that the application of Bourdieu's theory goes directly to the network of power relations that make the school leadership i.e., the principal's leadership habitus (Eacott, 2010). We see that the field of education has various kinds of hierarchies and every position has its own reward structures. A productive principal leadership habitus will look out for ways to initiate conversations within the schools as a way of spreading 'pedagogical practices' across the school and create a school culture which encourages student learning (Lingard and Christie, 2003).

Hence, a formal leader in a school should be able to look out for the logics of practices, challenge them, utilize them, mediate them, reject them, selectively work with them, reflect on them to stay focused on the main purposes of schooling (Lingard and Christie, 2003). A proper leadership would also be "connected to defining, defending and enabling a viable educational philosophy throughout the school" (Lingard and Christie, 2003). Therefore, when we say leadership is about behaviour and not characteristics, Bourdieu's theory helps us establish the fact and in the above illustration school being a complex organization requires a leadership habitus of a principal who takes the school ahead with better seeking opportunities and improved changes.

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