

**THE CONCEPT OF *HABITUS* - TOWARDS A COMPREHENSIVE
SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY OF CAREER CHOICE**

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Abstract

When searching for a sociological perspective on career choice-related problems, the issue of social rationality comes into focus. The labor markets provide structural opportunities, but are jobs simply allocated at a macro-social level, or individually chosen? By looking for an explanation strictly within a macro-social frame of reference, we came to a conclusion that may seem biased: social structure determines professional choices. But Structuralism fails to account for individual free will or social group influence. Group beliefs and values are always confronted with real labor market opportunities. We need theoretical models of career choice that can accommodate both the macro and micro social levels of understanding. We take Pierre Bourdieu's theory of praxis as a middle-range comprehensive theory rather than an all-encompassing explanation because it is not based on a priori statements but on empirical data. The rationality of social actors cannot be understood without comprehending their shared aspirations, motivations, constraints, beliefs and values, all of which are linked to their pragmatic rationality. This notion efficiently describes the permanent negotiations between the micro and macro levels of social existence, leading us to the concept of habitus. The individual physical, practical, emotional and cognitive dispositions that constitute the habitus, are continuously mediated by social structures. Negotiated within specific social fields, career decisions emerge as an interaction between the two levels.

Keywords: social rationality; Structuralism; pragmatic rationality; habitus; career decisions.

Introduction

In search of comprehensive theoretical models for better understanding career decisions as social processes, the issue of social rationality becomes an important concern. In evaluating different theoretical models of social action, Sociological Structuralism starts from the presumption that identifying social determinants is the key to understanding our professional choices. Social origin involves specific processes of socialization. Socio-demographic structural factors, such as gender or social class, do matter in choosing a profession. Social environments, first of all through the education systems, the parental influences and, especially, the continuous pressures created by the constraints of the labor markets have a quantifiable influence on career decisions. Starting from this finding, Structuralism address career issues from the perspective of the influence of macro-social variables: real labor market opportunities, socioeconomic status and family professional culture. Roberts (1997), for example, concludes that occupational choices depend on the dynamics of the relationship between family influences, educational achievements, the actual opportunities offered by the labor market, and the recruitment practices of employers.

The contributions of macro-social theories in understanding career decisions, although remarkable, are limited to making us aware of the specific social mobility issues involved by belonging to a certain social class, the role of labor markets in decision-making and the correlation between individual academic achievement and expected social mobility.

Objectives

Our primary objective is to demonstrate that the theory of social *praxis*, as formulated by Bourdieu, allows us to describe, in an accurately manner, career decisions as rational social actions.

Our second objective is to evaluate the usefulness of the praxis theory in career issues, especially related to the concepts of social field, social capital and habitus. We aim, in the following article, to evaluate the comprehensive potential of these concepts in understanding the phenomenon of professional career, especially in the social field of university education.

Hypotheses

Our primary hypothesis is: *the rationality of social actor has a bearing in explaining career decisions from a sociological standpoint*. We draw on Bourdieu's approach on the rationality of the social actor, describing it as pragmatic rationality. It is not a purely discursive

rationality. The classical elements of cognition, evaluation and calculus are present in our decisions, but pragmatic rationality also involves the emotional, affective, or axiological dimensions, inherent to our social existence.

Our secondary hypothesis is: *social experience has a situated character that corresponds to a specific set of attitudes and values, a specific way of transmitting information, a specific way of perception, knowledge and action.* Under these conditions, what Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) called practical sense or “sense of play” continuously constitutes the meanings of the social world, as a world in which we are always and totally immersed, and allows us to perceive and anticipate, in our everyday life, its immanent tendencies. To illustrate, Bourdieu uses the metaphor of the field of vision of football players, who are able to spontaneously know the movements of both opponents and teammates, managing to act in a coordinated, effective and seemingly inspired manner, without the need of what we call rational calculation. Although sometimes decisions can be the consequence of an anticipatory calculation, however, they are often shaped by what appears to us spontaneously as desirable or undesirable, always in a particular situation described by the concept of social field and, always, from a certain individual yet socially relevant point of view, described by the concept of habitus.

Analysis

For Bourdieu, reality is a socio-logical concept. To exist means to exist socially. Therefore, the definition of habitus is related to the ontology of everyday existence, an existence that is, as we have seen, one *par excellence* situated: habitus is “a structuring structure, which organizes both practices and the perception of practices” (Bourdieu, 1984). It is a set of constant dispositions, intimately related to social perception and action, which always take place in a specific context. Constituted by continuously integrating past experiences it represents the somatization of the cultural arbitrariness of a certain social order. Hodgkinson and Sparkes (1997) observed that this steady system of dispositions, actively transposed into new and new situations, continuously structures our perceptions, evaluations and actions, making us capable of fulfilling our various daily tasks.

The concept of habitus manages to accurately capture both the physical and the symbolic dimension of socialization processes. Formed through socialization, habitus influences the way we build and reconstruct, from our own point of view, the social world we live in, intimately relating it to the culture we belong to, but also to educational environments we experience. Habitus refers to our vision of the world, from aesthetic interests and tastes to

the beliefs we hold or values we adhere to. Moreover, it describes the continuous change that comes with advancing in age, with evolution along the educational paths we follow etc. Our individual biography is a history whose nature is always macro-social, always contextualized. Therefore, mediating between social structure and our free will, habitus ambivalently influences social practice: it enhances and restricts it at the same time (Bourdieu, 1992).

Directly influenced by the permanence of social change, habitus appears as a result of the individual incorporation of collective histories, always starting from our social origin, the social stratum we belong to, ethnic identity, etc. That is why the social practices it produces, both individually and collectively, are always in accordance with those particular schemes of thought and action discretely generated during these developments. The existence of habitus ensures the active presence of past experiences which, somatized in the form of thought and action structures, tend, more certainly than any explicitly promoted norms, to guarantee both the conformity of social practices and their constancy over time (Bourdieu, 1990). In this sense, formed at an early age, through primary socialization and then reproduced throughout the entire adult life, the family or primary habitus is the source of all standards of perception, evaluation and action. Through pedagogical processes, the cultural arbitrariness of social order is continuously imprinted.

Although it actively shapes our aspirations and expectations, habitus does not affect the reflective nature of our choices. For example, educational institutions legitimize or, on the contrary, contradict the family habitus. Bourdieu's concept describes how we identify the desirable and the undesirable, the chances we realize we have in our social situation, what we take, but also what we do not take into account when making a choice. The concept of habitus cannot be properly understood without considering the specificity of those tangible social structures we are living in. By structuring that particular way in which we perform socially, habitus has comprehensive value only in relation to a certain social field (Bourdieu, 1986). Habitus appears as a somatization, at the individual level, of the macro-social order of things. That is why it allows us to analyze the career phenomenon at the confluence between the thought patterns and action models of social agents and their social conditions.

As Pellandini-Simányi (2014) remarks, habitus appears as a sense of the social world, deeply internalized during socialization, incorporating normative ideas, ethical positions, frameworks of moral action, etc. But not in an abstract sense because it functions as an "eminently practical sense" (Bourdieu, 1984), of the good, of the desirable. Our worldviews are learned and transmitted through social practice. Ethical positions and normative ideas, inculcated from the first years of life, gradually become quasi-permanent dispositions,

incorporated, somatized, appearing in the form of perceptions and thinking schemes, with all-encompassing social applications.

Findings

As noted earlier, habitus appears as an embodiment, at the individual level, of the social order. Social actions can then be interpreted assessing players' social capitals, as they position themselves in relation to each other, in common contexts, called social fields. These contexts appear hierarchically structured, mainly due to the fact that the capital portfolios of social agents are always different. This makes the starting positions and, consequently, the possibilities for further development, not equal for all players.

The notion of social capital has a dynamic-relational significance in the sense that, permanently accumulated and invested, social capital is always converted and reconverted into alternative forms, always within a certain field. Social fields are very different from professional categories. Having no easy identifiable social labels, particular social fields are revealed to us by empirically observing the social practices of agents located in them, knowing that practice is always energized by specific stakes. The ultimate goal of every social actor is the acquisition of symbolic power, granted on different criteria, depending on the specifics of the field in which it is exercised. Career success can be considered as a stake in social actors game, unfolding chronologically but also simultaneously, inside multiple social fields: family, unions, political groups, professional organizations, religious communities etc. (Vaughan, 2002). Under these conditions, career habitus became a notion with significant comprehensive potential concerning career paths, because it allows the merging of the two perspectives of analysis: the field and the capital (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997).

Operationally defined, the career habitus is that habitus that tends to correspond to a certain career field. As particular social fields, career fields can be defined as social contexts, somewhat autonomous in relation to the entire social space, in which, at the same time, competing individual career paths take place. They are the playgrounds in which social agents build their careers, trying to move forward, starting inevitably from unequal resources in terms of economic revenue, education quality and social prestige (Iellatchitch, Mayrhofer & Meyer, 2003) In these contexts, their career habitus is actively formed by gradual incorporation of a individual but also collective career history. In building their own histories through social action, social agents exercise their full creative capacity, developing tactics and (re)investing capital, always within certain social structures. Their professional paths appear as an integral part of collective histories, histories that are constituted in time, by incorporation at multiple

individual levels, in the form of group habitus. In these fields, given that the capital portfolio is universal, the relationship between career habitus and career capital can be sociologically captured.

By comparison, the presence of career capital is relatively easy to notice by observing the transitions between different social fields, transitions accompanied by permanent conversions and reconversions of economic, symbolic or cultural capital, but also of other forms of capital such as gender capital. Within a career field, the conversion of cultural capital into some form of career capital can be noticed by observing the academic titles or diplomas, the skills and competencies put into play by agents, their cultural productions (publications, websites etc.) Career capital exists “in an institutionalized, objectified and embodied form” (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008).

One form of career capital is gender capital. Its conversion into career capital takes place in a world of (relative) male domination. But there are exceptions. Huppatz (2009) analyzes one of the professional fields of paid care from the point of view of the gender capital portfolio, evaluating it through the prism of social faith (*doxa*) of agents who play this particular career game. Prereflective by nature, *doxa* accurately describes the standard of social perception specific to a particular field, establishing who is entitled to pursue such a career, having a favorable capital portfolio - the orthodoxy of the field. Those who are not considered suitable for it are the heresy of the field. In the field of nursing, orthodoxy is represented by agents endowed with female capital. The male actors are treated with suspicion, both in terms of the skills required and their motivation to care for others. They represent the heresy of this field, in the sense that they are not perceived as good nurses. On the contrary, the active presence of female social role stereotypes makes the rate of conversion of gender capital into symbolic capital to be, in this case, extremely favorable to female agents. However, although social perception makes female capital a currency that can be advantageously converted into symbolic capital, vertical advancement is much more difficult for nurses (Huppatz, 2009).

Applying Bourdieu's notion of pragmatic rationality to the study of career decisions, we can confirm the conclusion that decision-making processes cannot be understood without taking into account variables as family socio-economical status, occupational culture and, especially, the similarities of multiple individual biographies. The notion of career habitus limits and, at the same time, allows a certain space for social action at an individual level. Under these conditions, the career decision process can be seen as series of routines and turning points associated with actual decision-making moments. As repetitive experiences correlated with changes occurring during life course (the transition from one educational status to another,

from education to work, or the evolution in professional life), routines continuously shape the decision-making manner. Within their own horizons of action, actors will make rational-pragmatic decisions, regardless of ethnicity, social class, gender or program of study (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997) .

We are directly interested in the field of university education. It appears, like any other social field, structured hierarchically. Given the relative equality of opportunities, the capital portfolio of student agents remains very different. It is composed primarily of cultural capital (their intellectual abilities, the accreditations they held, their individual level of knowledge), but also of economic and social capitals. Their tastes, attitudes and social class mannerisms are also important variables. The career decision involves assessing one's own abilities versus existing opportunities - it is a true rational calculation, but one that cannot be separated from the individual biography. The choice is not technically rational, just as it is not irrational.

Conclusions

As a theory of social action, the theory of praxis offers certain advantages in the study of career as a social phenomenon.

First of all, it is not built on *a priori* statements, but based on empirical data.

Secondly, it seems structurally open to further developments. Concepts such as habitus, social field and social capital have already been applied, with relative success, in researching the phenomenon of professional career.

Third, it makes possible the connection between the macro-social and the micro-social levels of understanding in terms of career aspects, making possible a sociologically comprehensive theory on how social structures are actively present at an individual level. Bourdieu's notions manage to describe, in a surprisingly efficient way, the permanent negotiations between the micro and the macro level of social existence. It refers to the way we end up making decisions that tend to reflect the structure of our daily experience, an experience always lived within the context of a continuous interaction with other social actors, placed, alongside us, in very similar situations.

In conclusion, regarding the sociological research of career related phenomena, the theory of praxis, as formulated by Pierre Bourdieu, can be theoretically advantageous only as a middle-range theory for two reasons:

- its application as an all-encompassing theory would lead to significant difficulties regarding the use of concepts in actual field research

- any theory of career praxis will directly depend on empirical data collected about career fields, data that can be extremely different

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