Bourdieu's first year

Jordan S. Sly

University of Maryland, College Park, MD

Abstract: This column explores the question: Is there a danger in applying sociological theory to student learning when working with first generation students?

Author Bio: Jordan Sly is a research, instruction, and outreach librarian at the University of Maryland in College Park. This short article reflects an ongoing research project that stems from his interest in the evolving role of librarians on American college campuses and how we as a student-centered support office can help students learn the language of academia and succeed by first focusing on their diverse and interesting background and experiences.

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This column reflects an ongoing project of developing a method for understanding the first generation student experience through the critical framework of the twentieth-century philosopher and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, particularly with his work on *Habitus*—a sociological and philosophical orientation which seeks to understand, in its simplest form, the experiential knowledge of a population and the set parameters of linguistic and sociology-psychological interactions that defines these fields of experience (Bourdieu, 1984).[1] This is a topic on which I have presented and from which I have received interest, but one that has been difficult to actualize into an experiment or method. One reason for this difficulty is the fear of grouping, or essentializing, first generation students in a way that is potentially both inaccurate and unreflective of their individual experiential realities. Essentialism is a process of defining and determining set traits in order to categorize or group populations, but this process is inherently reductive and potentially harmful. In this brief column, I seek to explain the basic notions of *Habitus* discussing how this highly theoretical sociological framework can help us understand the first generation college student experience. It will contrast the experience of this group with those I refer to as the "college normative student," or the student for whom college is a foregone conclusion because of the intersectional matrix of their education and socioeconomic background. It is my hope to expand these ideas into a larger project for this journal, but, again, this process leads to problematic and difficult formulations that may prevent the full transition from theory to practice.

[1] Bourdieu has multiple works dealing with Habitus, importantly including his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977). Additionally, works such as *Distinction* (1979) and *Homo Academicus* (1984) further explicate Bourdieu's theory and give it clarity not seen in his earlier work.

The origins of this project stem not from experience in my current post at the University of Maryland, but rather from two previous positions going back about five years: a private boarding high school and a small, rural, liberal arts college. These schools recruit from populations that differed from each other in almost every socioeconomic category and profile. The high school was not entirely elite, however, nor was the rural college entirely made up of agricultural families or even college normative students, but there was an anecdotal and noticeable difference between the two, particularly with regard to their college readiness in a couple of different areas.

It was during a faculty meeting at the liberal arts college when *Habitus* first occurred to me as a framework to understand students' experiential differences and how this might be connected with academic success. The college's retention numbers were sagging, and of particular interest to the administration was the issue of first generation students who, according to their data, left without a degree at a higher rate than other student groups. A suggested cause for this trend was that these students were perhaps not cut out for the rigors of a college course load. I, and many of the faculty present, found this insulting to the intelligence of these first generation students. There was no arguing with the data, however, as a measurable retention problem did indeed exist within this cohort.

When the college's president presented testimony from students who had left the college or re-enrolled, there was a discernible, if anecdotal, trend. The examples referred to students feeling that they did not fit in with the other students, that they felt inadequate, and that they were unfamiliar with the expectations of college life. Additionally, the report stated that these students were leaving, at least in a few examples, for community colleges. This information can be interpreted —or at least so the administration interpreted it— as a trend in which students were going to community college as a way to ease into the college experience. There is some truth to that assumption. If, however, we critically

assess this trend in conjunction with the words of the students themselves, we can possibly apply Bourdieu's theories to illustrate a potential conflict between types of students.

Habitus can be most simply described as the cultural language in which one is most fluent. To be clear, cultural language can be summarized as the specific codes, assumptions, affectations, accents, clothing, attitudes, language, and values of an individual group. These are then identified as social, cultural, economic, and educational *capital,* with each area having a defined set of codes that identifies aspects of that person. *Capital* is what the individual carries into all other areas of life. At the risk of reductionism: you can take the boy out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy. These aspects of the cultural language, or *capital,* can signal to others where that individual fits within a group and within that group's rules or *doxa*. These groups are the *fields* in which an individual must find themselves based on what is available to them via these *doxa*. In other words, the ways in which an individual's upbringing has defined the world through cultural assumptions, understandings, and affectations in turn dictates interactions both inside and outside their normative *field*. This all comes down to an assumption that is based on how well the individual's *capital,* and thus *Habitus* (being the sum of these other interactions)*,* aligns with the *field's doxa* in order to indicate the success of that individual's *practice*.

Within a university setting, the rules, fields, and practices are religiously adhered to and potentially opaque. A factor in this opacity is potentially an error in translation, particularly for those students who were not taught the cultural language for a given setting at a young age, which then causes them to have difficulty with fluency. Such fluency is not an impossibility, but it requires intense cognition, training, and studied habituation. In other words, the environment in which one is comfortable is due, at least in part, to one's upbringing and the values, assumptions, and expectations

shared with those around them. This shared knowledge, and the ability to speak this shared cultural language, is what Bourdieu describes as *Les Sens Pratique,* or the practical and at-hand knowledge of a *field*.

The types of students who are at odds here, I believe, are college normative students and the first generation students. Again, it is important to state that this is not a value judgement. There is nothing wrong with either group or with their experiences or backgrounds. The goal in applying these theories is to acknowledge differences and to identify strengths, thus equalizing the college environment in such a way as to mitigate the unfair, but understudied, advantages of students with mastery of these cultural languages, particularly when compared to first generation students. Within this framework, college normative students are seen to have been raised in a culture that values the *capital* gained through college, and they often have parents who most likely work and exist in a *field* with those same expectations. Conversely, first generation students may find that the *field* of college represents a different set of social and economic *capital* and a cultural language with which they are unfamiliar. In a literal sense, there could be an actual language difference for students from non-native English speaking families; in a figurative sense, the language of cultural norms and *capital* assumptions, which college normative students learn through a combination of family conversation and school expectation, are equally difficult to "translate." In other words, college normative students may simply be more familiar with the collegiate language of the classroom, with their professors' expectations, and with the numerous and intangible assumptions and expectations so frequently underlying interactions with university administrators. This is not a fault, nor again am I looking to essentialize or patronize first generation students, but these *doxa* make up the rules for successful

practice. If first generation students are missing elements of these *doxa*, it could contribute to some of the issues we see with retention.

To conclude this short column, I want to discuss the potential role of the library as the focus of this project. Libraries occupy a unique position on most campuses, and they may be able to provide a substantive intervention for these students. Librarians can assist students in their transition by teaching skills needed to master the cultural language of college, which will better enable them to focus (as college normative students often do) on their studies. I will expand on the forms and methods of this intervention in the full study, but as of this writing, I have not yet developed this project beyond a theoretical sketch.

There is value in this type of project, however. The more we start to think about the lives of our students and the depth of their lives outside of our walls, the more effective we can be as educators. Through conversations with sociologists and educational researchers, it is clear that this project will fill a need, but they share my concerns about essentializing the experiential reality of the students in a potentially harmful way. As I work through these ideas, I fear reducing first generation students to that one facet of their identity that potentially hinders their successful integration on campus by removing them from their cohort, even when there are good intentions to aid in their transition. Additionally, while libraries are potentially well positioned to help, it is not yet fully clear that we can offer the best possible services to students in this area. My fear is that a project and mission of this scale may require a depth of experience and commitment that libraries are not typically able to address. Our instructional and outreach toolkits — despite evolutions and innovations— still favor traditional interventions such as the one-shot or extracurricular workshop, which may pose a barrier to the maintenance of deep and lasting programs. It is my belief, however, that as our roles as librarians

continue to evolve, it is our responsibility to seek out areas where our students need the most support. As an outreach librarian, I see our role expanding into the further reaches of campus support offices, counseling centers, student groups in order to address specific student needs such as those of first-generation students.

References

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