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Reflecting on Habitus, Field and Capital

Towards a Culturally Sensitive Social Work

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Abstract

- *Summary*: This article argues that the notion of the knowledge base as a central aspect of professional activity is flawed, and that it is more useful to see social work as in a continuous process of constructing and reconstructing professional knowledge.
- *Findings*: Culture is an area that has attracted widespread attention in academia and the social professions. However, there has been little examination of culturally sensitive social work practice from a realist perspective, or one that starts from the view that oppressive structures, as encoded within social class, are essential determinants of cultural experience. Following a critique of postmodern perspectives on culture, the work of Pierre Bourdieu on culture and power is explored.
- *Applications*: Three of Bourdieu's key constructs – habitus, field and capital – are utilized to develop a model for culturally sensitive social work practice that attends to the interplay of agency and structure in reproducing inequalities within the social world.

Keywords culture model cultural sensitivity power realism

There is broad consensus for the view that culture is one of the most discussed and debated concepts in the popular and academic worlds today. Historically, this interest has followed a unique trajectory. From its early antiquarian roots, where it was linked with tilling of the land (O'Hagan, 1999), the concept has diversified to include people's creative expression in the arts. Within this modality further differentiation resulted in high and low forms of artistic endeavour: the former the preserve of grandiose elites, the latter encrypted within populist discourse. More recently, however, the concept has been mainstreamed throughout society, finding expression in politics (where nascent governments highlight the need for cultural change as part of a 'spin offensive'); in corporate governance (where organizations link their success with cultural ambience on

the shop floor); and in the burgeoning growth of the consumer industries (where a trip to the hypermarket is seen as an everyday cultural experience).

The analysis of such transformations, developed under the aegis of cultural studies, mirrors the diversity of its subject matter in the range of approaches that are adopted. Indeed, the contemporary interest in cultural studies signifies a major academic revolution embracing a wide territory of interest including post-colonial discourse, the politics of diaspora, feminist perspectives, techno-culture and the much reported effects of globalization. At the heart of this paradigm, though, is a critical social scientific perspective which sees cultural reproduction as the logical outcome of (late) capitalism (Jameson, 1991). Tellingly, in an economic system that seeks to accumulate capital at all costs, the culture industry is ripe for exploitation. In this mature stage of capitalism, culture becomes a product or commodity to be sold to the masses. Once a distinct preserve, it has now merged with the social, affecting external relations and inner subjectivities to such an extent that life has become one-dimensional (Marcuse, 1964).

It can be seen that the ubiquity of culture in popular discourse, and the way it has been critically explored within cultural studies, make it an area worthy of serious attention by the social work academy and the social professions. In spite of a growing literature on the subject, however, there has been little examination of culturally sensitive social work practice from a realist perspective, or one that starts from the view that oppressive structures, as encoded for example within social class, are essential determinants of cultural life. Instead, and despite its serious shortcomings, the now fashionable adherence to post-modernism and constructionist social work has provided an alluring paradigmatic lens through which culturally sensitive practice is apprehended. But by fixing our attention on the discursive and linguistic constructions of cultural experience which these approaches engender, we are in danger of losing sight of the material domain (that is, the world of economic structures) and its effects on culture (Harris, 1978; Nightingale and Cromby, 1999). Moreover, there is a risk of lapsing into postmodernism's celebration of the pastiche, where an array of variegated signs and images cohere to replace reality as the focus of enquiry and a surreal depthlessness emasculates critical analysis.

This article will outline a model for culturally sensitive practice based on the critical, structuralist approach of the French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu. A preamble is necessary and I will shape this as follows. First, a critical appraisal of the constructionist position on culture and culturally sensitive social work is attempted. This is followed by an outline of realist thinking on culture and its contribution to emancipatory practice in a world riven with inequality and alienation. This section will review the thinking of the major progenitors of critical cultural studies before presenting Bourdieu's ideas on cultural reproduction and their relevance for social work practice with those excluded or marginalized by race, class, gender or ethnic background.

Constructionist Approaches to Culture

According to Burr (1995), social constructionism envelops several intellectual approaches which emphasize the way in which experience is socially produced rather than naturally given. Common to these approaches is a resemblance founded on the idea that knowledge is context-bound; that meaning is contingent on time and setting; and that social life is not uniform nor determined by essential processes. These precepts have found a notable expression in postmodernism which has been described by Kellner (1989: 2) as the 'hottest game in town'. Ironically, although much heat has been generated, the game's constitution remains obscure, with many commentators having difficulty defining it.

However, Hebdige (1986) provides important clarity by insisting that the movement is characterized by three negations. The first of these concerns postmodernism's abandonment of any universalizing claims about the subject or society, claims which are emblematic of the Enlightenment period. Lyotard's 'incredulity towards metanarratives' (Lyotard, 1984: 24) captured the essence of this position. Linked to this is the rejection of theories which attempt to understand events in terms of deliberate, traceable causes. For example, postmodernists take issue with the perceived economic reductionism within vulgar Marxism that presents culture as the direct expression of the mode of production. For them, causation is more complicated and problematic: purposes, motives and reasons are often contradictory, circuitous and difficult to map. The third negation eschews Enlightenment aspirations for a Utopian society based on principles of rational enquiry and consensus. In short, postmodernists controversially claim that Utopias come wrapped in barbed wire and direct our attention to the genocide perpetrated by many regimes claiming to be humanitarian.

Postmodernism reaches its apogee when it evaluates popular culture. The social world, according to this perspective, becomes indistinguishable from images relayed through film and television soap opera. Baudrillard (1983: 1) expands on this declaration as follows: 'Abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of the territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory . . .'

Immersed in a sea of signs which have no referents in the material world, we struggle forward into a nihilistic future where meaning is fractured and temporal, 'leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and the simulated generation of difference' (Baudrillard, 1983: 2). Eco (1993) points to Disneyland as the site *par excellence* of this hyper-real dimension of modern life. It is in this theme park that the quintessence of modern culture is played out through endless representation which appears more real than the reality it attempts to supplant.

The negation of the real in social life is also accompanied by postmodernism's attempts to debunk the cultural elitism typified by the modernist authors Leavis (1930) and Arnold (1961). In the postmodern formulation, popular culture is elevated and so-called high culture problematized: 'post modernism first emerges out of a generational refusal of the categorical certainties of high modernism. The insistence on an absolute distinction between high and popular came to be regarded as the "unhip" assumption of an older generation' (Storey, 1998: 346).

This rupture of the modernist canon and its classificatory systems of culture has been progressed by a number of postmodern authors. McRobbie (1994) views postmodernity as a period when pluralistic viewpoints on what is culturally acceptable abound. Fox (1999) analyses the social construction of risk in contemporary culture and challenges the way such constructions mask political control over individuals' lives. Bauman (1991) critiques modernist culture for its relentless and intolerant drive to remove all forms of uncertainty, difference and ambiguity.

Nearer to home, though, there has been a notable dalliance between the social work academy and constructionist perspectives (Parton and O'Byrne, 2000; Rojek et al., 1988; Joniken et al., 1999). Indeed, it is interesting to observe how the nihilistic and negatory undertones of postmodernism have been excoriated by social work theorists who are sympathetic to the perspective. For example, Parton and Marshall (1998) make the distinction between affirmative and sceptical postmodernism. The former approach, they argue, adopts a measured relativism enabling practitioners to engage in 'truth redefinition' rather than 'truth-denying responses'. In short, it allows the profession to empower the socially excluded and is therefore to be contrasted with sceptical postmodernism's descent into a relativistic abyss. In a similar vein, Healy (2000) corrects the deficits within post-structuralism, making it relevant to social work.

We can also observe how ideas about culturally sensitive and competent social work practice have become entwined with a constructionist epistemology. Ben-David (1998: 103) highlights cultural pluralism as the guiding rationale for emancipatory practice linking it to the postmodern view that 'what we know as reality is the result of interactions with others . . . as determined by the social and cultural contexts in which an individual is operating'. Similarly, Saleebey (1994: 351) argues that culture gives meaning to human action and narrative by 'situating underlying states in an interpretive system', and Husband (2000) makes a clarion call for cultural difference in social work based on postmodernism's respect for situational contingency. For these authors, then, the axial principle on which culturally sensitive social work is based is 'a perpetual questioning of universals or dominant world views (in which) the ability to construct a self that is variegated is one possible answer to perpetual strife or to the tyrannical imposition of one world view over another' (Martinez-Brawley and Brawley, 1997: 15).

A range of authors have also applied constructionist ideas to culturally sensitive practice within therapeutic and clinical sites (Lesser and Eriksen, 2000; Greene et al., 1996; Lee, 1996). Moreover, in the field of social work education, we can see this perspective gaining ground. For example, Lee and Greene (1999) describe a teaching framework which aims to develop cultural competence by inducting students into the key tenets of what they term social constructivism (a position synthesizing constructionist and contructivist ideas).

Turning now to an evaluation of these approaches, it is important first to acknowledge the insight that contemporary culture is ostensibly postmodern in the sense of the fluidity of life. Who could disagree with the proposition that meaning has become increasingly fractured or that centres of power appear to be shifting? However, the key fallacy of postmodernism lies in its attempt to recast the postmodern period as a distinctive rupture from modernity (Callinicos, 1989). In doing so, it fails to acknowledge that tensions between instrumental and critical reason (which are so fundamental to the modernist landscape) are still being played out, albeit in different ways and subject to pervasive, globalized pressures (McGuigan, 1999). So, rather than rupture, we need to reinstate important continuities between the past and present. More specifically, we need to hold on to the *modus operandi* of the modern period: that is, the drive to accumulate capital. Jameson (1991), in reviewing how this process unfolds, argues that culture has become commodified in order to satiate the demands of multinational corporations.

Making a similar point, although one applied through fiction to a different epoch, the writer F. Scott Fitzgerald (in his famous novel *Tender is the Night*) depicts how changes in the culture industry in prewar America were linked to key economic imperatives. In other words, profits needed to be sustained through the expansion and diversification of markets. To achieve this, culture became a product that could be bought and sold. More importantly, the novel shows the link between cultural transformations and the identities of the characters. Formerly preoccupied by leisure and manners, the *nouveaux riches* in the novel become absorbed with the latest cultural fads.

If the social work profession fails to grasp this point – that culture is inextricably tied to capitalism's evolution – then its sensitivity and competence will be undermined. Put in another way, if we view culture through a postmodern lens there is a danger of reducing our analysis to linguistic narratives, signs and disembodied discourses. The cost is palpable because what is at stake is the effects of material reality, of class conflict, work-induced alienation, polluted environments and, lastly, loss of contact with the corporeal domain. Culture, Bourdieu reminds us, may provide the ground for symbolic interaction, but it is also a source of domination and power relations which serve to reproduce institutionalized hierarchies. In the next section, these effects are explored more fully through a realist perspective on culture.

Realist Approaches to Culture

Realism is a philosophical movement which claims that social phenomena, such as structures and institutions, have an existence beyond the lives of individual actors who constitute them. (Consequently, it differs from extreme constructionist perspectives which espouse the view that what we term structure is no more than a creation of language or discourse.) The British philosopher Bhaskar (1978) suggests that structures are often the unseen determinants of social life; nevertheless, we can measure their effects. Take, for example, a securely bonded child playing happily with his mother in a room. If the mother leaves the room and a stranger enters, then it is likely that the child will protest, usually by crying. For Bhaskar, the episode demonstrates that unseen attachment structures (or mechanisms) have been activated within the child to produce behaviours that can be measured empirically. Although this represents an example from the interpersonal world, Bhaskar argues that we can also uncover structures within social constellations. Drawing on Marx, he points to the insuperable effects of economic structures (the 'base') on cultural life (the 'superstructure'); or, to restate this in Marx's (1967) inimitable style: 'the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life-process in general. It is not the consciousness of men [sic] that determines their being, but on the contrary it is their social being that determines their consciousness.'

The Marxian view of culture in capitalist society has struck a chord with a number of theorists. For example, Althusser (1971) viewed the cultural domain of society as an ideological battleground where the state manipulated and reproduced dominant cultural formations through coercive and educational means. Unlike Marx, though, he argued that the cultural realm could exercise some independence from the economy even though in the final analysis economic imperatives would prevail. In an Althusserian moment, Hall et al. (1978) explored how the British state in the 1970s excised civil discontent by introducing repressive measures through the criminal justice system. By way of contrast, Gramsci (1971: 80) argued that the capitalist state exerted more subtle, hegemonic measures to reproduce culture:

> the parliamentary regime is characterised by the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent. Indeed, the attempt is always made to ensure that force will appear to be based on the consent of the majority, expressed by the so-called organs of public opinion – newspapers and associations – which, therefore, in certain situations, are artificially multiplied.

In summary, realist perspectives (in the Marxist tradition) are right to acknowledge the role played by capitalism in reproducing inequality and the status quo within culture. Yet they are in danger of lapsing into an overly deterministic analysis that fails to do justice to human agency. My point is that human action has the possibility of transforming social and cultural arrangements either

through the intended or unintended consequences of that action (Giddens, 1984). People, as such, are not cultural 'dopes'. It is for this reason that Bourdieu's perspective on culture and power holds so much credence because it acknowledges, on the one hand, that there are irrepressible structures linked to the mode of production within capitalism that shape culture, while, on the other, it gives recognition to actors' abilities to effect change in their daily lives. Thus, Bourdieu's sprawling *oeuvre* is animated by the desire to overcome this false antinomy between realist and constructionist accounts of social life. In this sense it would be wrong to label him as a pure realist; in fact he eschews all disciplinary labels, but it is nevertheless clear that he is deeply indebted to his realist mentors, Marx, Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss, Althusser and Saussure. In fact, some commentators, like Ritzer (1996: 537), see an implicit bias towards these thinkers: 'There is more continuity in his work with structuralism than there is with constructivism.'

Within this qualified realism, Bourdieu proceeds to illuminate the interrelationship between culture, power and social reproduction. A central pillar of his theoretical edifice relates to the question of how social systems reproduce hierarchy and domination in culture without mass opposition arising. The answer to this question can be found in his view that at the heart of culture lie vested interests and struggles to attain symbolic and material advantage over others. Inherent within all forms of action, then, is power and a drive to attain the upper hand through sometimes deliberate, but more often habitual or tacit, strategizing. The analogy of a chess game is relevant here. So, within the different arenas of social life, actors are socialized to plan the best move in order to accumulate prestige, kudos or wealth. In turn, they unwittingly reproduce existing divisions, social hierarchies and class formations.

These essential premises about culture are reflected in Bourdieu's celebrated work on aesthetics, *Distinction* (1979). Here he charts how class influences everyday lifestyle and taste: the food we eat, our preferred newspaper, whether we are interested in so-called high culture. Accordingly, taste serves to differentiate people, to situate them in specific social groupings: 'taste is first and foremost the distaste of the tastes of others' (Wacquant, 1998: 223). More to the point, the higher classes are able to indulge their tastes freely because they have the resources to do so, whereas their proletarian counterparts have limited means to achieve their aspirations in the chess game of social progression. Freed from the exigencies of material subsistence, the bourgeoisie focuses its attention on ways of accumulating prestige and wealth.

It can be seen then that Bourdieu draws on many Marxist ideas about culture. For instance, he accepts the primacy of class interests and the material domain in bringing about social divisions within civil society. Yet, he distances himself from the Marxian position by extolling a more nuanced view of class. Rather than reducing it to the mode of production, Bourdieu frames class as a wider manifestation of our experience of education and gender relations.

Developing Culturally Sensitive Practice

To summarize the argument so far, unless we acknowledge the unassailable link between culture, social structure and social inequality, social work practice at best will prove to be ineffectual and at worst may serve to reproduce unwittingly the divisions which it is attempting to remove. For Bourdieu, there is a fundamental danger of misrecognizing how culture cements individuals and groups into patterns of domination. Because we are immersed in culture, it will determine our thoughts and actions – often in subliminal ways.

Claiming professional or scientific objectivity is no defence against the pervasive effect of culture on our lives. Thus, Kuhn (1970) showed how so-called scientific or neutral ideas are formed by prevailing paradigms that are later modified, and Althusser (cited in Benton, 1998) referred to the governing role of problematics or conceptual frameworks which direct us to pose certain questions and omit others. For Bourdieu, we must combat misrecognition through a process of socioanalysis. By this he means the practice of uncovering the taken for granted ways through which actors (including intellectuals and professionals) pursue their vested interests and thereby bring about an unegalitarian system.

The question now remains as to how socioanalysis can be operationalized by the social work profession which has, as part of its value base, a declared aim of tackling oppression, social exclusion and discrimination wherever it is located. The model articulated below seeks to extrapolate Bourdieu's ideas to the practice domain by describing four sequential stages of analysis:

1. developing our understanding of the dynamics of cultural oppression;
2. enhancing reflexive capacity so that we can reflect persistently on the impact of culture on our taken for granted assumptions and actions and how these affect others;
3. being sensitive to clients' experiences of culture and the meanings it has produced for them, including their narratives about oppressive experiences; and
4. developing practical strategies for empowering the culturally excluded.

Each of these stages flows from the preceding one. Thus, we must commence the helping process by firstly understanding the basis of culture; only then can we proceed to examine its effects on ourselves and the clients with whom we engage.

Stage One: Understanding the Relationship Between Culture, Power and Reproduction

This beginning stage requires the social worker to develop an accurate appreciation of the role of culture in modern life, how it affects individuals through childhood socialization and is eventually reproduced by those individuals through their day-to-day actions. We have already examined some of

Bourdieu's basic ideas about this process. However, underpinning these insights are a number of interrelated conceptual devices which give considerable explanatory power to his work.

The first of these is denoted by the term habitus, which Bourdieu (1989: 18) explains as 'internalised "embodied" social structures'. Elsewhere, he defines habitus as our 'cultural unconscious' or 'mental habits' or 'internalised master dispositions' which lead to particular perceptions and actions that are durable in character. Implicit within the concept, then, is an acknowledgement that social structure is deeply ingrained within us all, that our ways of interpreting the social world are influenced by our social milieus. However pervasive this influence may be, though, Bourdieu reminds us that we are not automatons or mindless vehicles of our governing habitus. Rather, habitus acts as a very loose set of guidelines permitting us to strategize, adapt, improvise or innovate in response to situations as they arise. This type of action is not typically pre-mediated, but more often works in a pre-reflective manner as part of an inner set of dispositions which result in 'a feel for the game' (Jenkins, 1992). Moreover, habitus is both a product and (re)producer of the social world: 'on the one hand, habitus is a structuring structure; that is, it is a structure that structures the social world. On the other hand, it is a structured structure; that is, it is a structure which is structured by the social world' (Ritzer, 1996: 541). Put differently, action is a dialectical process whereby we internalize the external world but also externalize the internal world.

Through continuing socialization an individual's habitus will come to mirror social divisions within his or her surrounding culture. More specifically, it will reflect class and material differences: 'habitus, then, represents a sort of deep-structuring cultural matrix that generates self-fulfilling prophecies according to different class opportunities' (Swartz, 1997: 104). Structural disadvantages which may be present, for example, within the educational system, are internalized within children as they mature, leading to particular ways of viewing the world. According to Bourdieu, fundamental life chances are determined by our habitus because it becomes embodied in the way we speak and in our preferred tastes, proclivities and deportment. Others react to us on the basis of these class markers to reinforce existing perceptions of our place in the social world.

A second conceptual tool arises: that of the field. For Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 97), the field represents a

> network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.).

We can therefore think of fields as arenas of social relationship that are characterized by power differentials among the actors who make them up. A number

of these fields within modern capitalist society have a determinative effect on individuals and their habitus including the economic sphere, the world of art, academia, sports and so on. To reiterate an earlier point, they are not founded on consensus. Rather, Bourdieu presents the field as a battleground where interests, power and prestige all operate. Thus, domination and subordination lie at the heart of cultural experience. So, instead of being socialized into consensual arrangements, actors are thrust into a zero-sum game where the curators of culture (those with established power) and the creators of culture (those seeking power) struggle for strategic advantage.

Bourdieu suggests that a field of considerable importance is education, for it is here that social inequality is most evident. Children from working-class backgrounds will enter the school environment with a habitus that reflects particular assumptions about the role and value of education. For them, education is often seen as a means of acquiring practical skills. Teachers in the school may also work on the basis of preconceived views about what children from different classes can or should achieve. Indeed, basic markers of class – the way the child talks, for instance – lead to different expectations and approaches from those in authority. These perceptions are supported by Bernstein (1971) who showed how children from working-class backgrounds present with restricted language codes. These codes reflect patterns of speech in which sentences are short and grammatically simple. Tellingly, the restricted code was shown by Bernstein to disadvantage the child as teachers responded more favourably to an elaborated code, or one which involved more complex, abstract terminology.

Bourdieu's conceptual arsenal is made complete by a third and final heuristic, that of capital. Earlier, it was suggested that the field was characterized by struggle. For Bourdieu, the outcome of the struggle will be determined by the amount of capital (or resources) possessed by competing actors in a given field. Four types of capital are delineated: economic, cultural, social and symbolic. Economic capital refers to wealth defined in monetary terms; cultural capital involves a person's or institution's possession of recognized knowledge; social capital is constituted by social ties; and symbolic capital refers to one's status, honour or prestige.

Our position in the social hierarchy will be determined by the amount and type of capital possessed. Dominant classes within society are endowed with large amounts of capital, whereas subjugated classes struggle hard to supplement their meagre assets. But even in the dominant classes there are discernible cleavages. On the one hand, there are those with large amounts of economic capital but few cultural resources (those in business); on the other, there are those who mainly possess cultural capital (the intelligentsia). Regardless of how capital is configured, though, it will be utilized to attain strategic ground. This may necessitate converting or transmuting one form of capital into another. For example, cultural capital attained through recognized academic qualifications can be used in the employment field to increase one's economic capital.

The interrelationship between habitus, field and capital helps explain how

culture affects people, and how they reproduce their taken for granted worlds. Furthermore, it shows that social life is not undifferentiated. The many fields of social life present as distinct microcosms, each with their own particular stakes and rules. Armed with these conceptual tools, social workers can begin to understand and explain the deep-seated nature of cultural disadvantage which Bourdieu claims is at the heart of modern society. The remaining stages of the model draw on these tools to enable social workers to enhance their sensitivity to the culturally excluded.

Stage Two: Enhancing Professional Reflexivity

Stage Two demands that social workers analyse their taken for granted views on culture and its impact on cultural identity and culturally sensitive practice before they intervene in clients' lives. Clearly, while the first stage facilitates a cognitive understanding of culture, its dynamics and basis, it must then be applied to the self through critical introspection. Unless we reflect on our personal habitus and the professional field in which it is anchored, there is a danger of replicating biased notions that have been inculcated through professional training, managerial directives or experiences in embattled social work agencies. This awareness is gained through reflexivity. To summarize, reflexivity refers to the process whereby we continually reflect on how the assumptions underpinning our practice have been mediated through habitus and field.

Bourdieu (1988) lays tremendous emphasis on this process but applies it mainly to the higher-education field. Nonetheless, his ideas on the subject have relevance to social work professionals who, like their educational counterparts, are concerned with human betterment (White, 1997). To take forward this imperative, Bourdieu recommends that we attend to two key areas. First, there is a need to reflect on our personal values, attitudes and perceptions and how they shape our actions. More specifically, the effects of socialization, education, gender relations and importantly, social class, need to be considered. Two important questions arise here: in what ways has our cultural identity been shaped by these factors; and can we identify any blind spots in our personal narratives?

The effects of the field in which we operate constitutes the second area. All professional groups are immersed in a governing field. This field will shape our professional view of the world. It therefore acts like the beam of a torch, illuminating certain parts of the path while leaving other parts in shadow. Accordingly, the field allows us to pose certain questions but excludes others. Alternatively, it acts as a censor to either allow or disallow key ideas. For Bourdieu, therefore, reflexivity promotes awareness of how the field distorts perceptions of reality. For social workers, in particular, the welfare field will exact its own requirements and impose its own strictures, but what are they?

Peillon (1998) uses Bourdieu's notions of field, habitus and capital to explore the dynamics of the welfare field. A key facet of this field, suggests Peillon, is its normalizing tendencies: 'a wide range of highly personalised

features of supervision and control have been set in place and the main normalising agents in the welfare field are doctors, teachers and social workers' (p. 218). Building on the work of Habermas (1984: 87), Foucault (1975) and Donzelot (1979), Peillon is essentially saying that welfare acts firstly to pacify discontent amongst the working classes or, in Habermas's terms, to avert a legitimation crisis in the capitalist state. This is achieved through the provision of benefits and services which mollify welfare recipients. Second, the role of social care professionals is primarily one of surveillance based on investigatory and classificatory practices. Thus, 'welfare agencies and welfare clients belong to a structure of domination' (p. 221). But it is a structure that is often misrecognized by both. For Bourdieu, misrecognition occurs not only within a particular field, but is endemic to society as a whole. In short, it is a result of widespread symbolic violence in culture. The origins of this violence lie in various acts of pedagogic authority and childhood socialization, resulting in a failure to detect the true nature of social life, that is, its power-saturated nature. Social workers, like any professional group, operate to perpetuate this form of violence, but often unwittingly.

It is imperative for social workers to reflect persistently on these aspects of the welfare field and its impact on their professional habitus. However, although habitus has a determining effect on behaviour, it must be remembered that it is not a psychic prison. People, according to Bourdieu, exercise their agency: clients adopt resistant strategies to social work interventions (Peillon, 1998); and social workers act to thwart bureaucratic and controlling imperatives in their work (Houston and McCullough, 2001). Indeed, the various types of capital mentioned above are often utilized in these counter-offensives. With this in mind, social workers ought to reflect on how they can disidentify themselves from the welfare field and their own personal habitus to expose practices founded on symbolic violence. A fully reflexive practice leads us to the third stage of the model.

Stage Three: Developing Cultural Sensitivity

Cultural sensitivity may be equated with an affective empathy which seeks to remain open to others' experiences and resists defensive closure (Husband, 2000: 232). In turn, empathy can be seen as a process that involves accurate understanding of another person's cultural experience, emotions and behaviours (Egan, 1998). Integrating these definitions into Bourdieu's theory leads to a number of important areas of enquiry. First and foremost, what experiences has the client had in the various fields affecting his or her life? In particular, what gains and losses have been accrued in the political, educational and welfare fields? Remember, these are the fields most associated with symbolic violence. Second, how have life events including childhood socialization affected the client's taken for granted perceptions of self, others and the social world? This question relates to the nature and functioning of habitus and cultural identity. Third, how has the client experienced the material aspects of

life, that is, work, economic livelihood and class relations? It is important to recall an earlier point that in the final analysis material factors outweigh all others in shaping human action. In saying this, Bourdieu also highlights the salience of race, ethnicity and gender in shaping habitus, and so these areas must also be explored. Last, have there been opportunities for the client to transcend habitus by seeking out new forms of capital or using the capital available to its best advantage in relevant fields? In this context, it is important to assess whether the client believes his or her actions can transform social arrangements. A strong sense of personal agency is an essential plank of any empowerment platform (see Stage Four below).

In posing these questions, social workers should be attentive to an experience which Bourdieu refers to as hystersis. This occurs when a person is uprooted from one culture and placed in another. The effect of hystersis will be most pernicious when the two cultures differ radically in their social formation. Take, for example, a political refugee from an agrarian country who comes to live in a Western metropolis for the first time. Consider how this person's habitus will be thrown into complete disarray. Customs, social graces, deportment and basic meaning will all be problematized. What is more, the fields in the new culture will have different stakes and stakeholders. For the refugee in question, feeling like a fish out of water is likely to lead to great mental uneasiness. Similar feelings could also be experienced by ethnic minorities living in a society whose sensitivity to difference is limited by notions of liberal tolerance (Husband, 2000). On a lesser scale, hystersis also operates whenever we are thrust out of our taken for granted social milieus. Thus, young people leaving home for the first time often experience bouts of homesickness.

Culturally sensitive social work must also be attentive to the fundamental, existential ground of being. In contrast to Giddens, who stresses ontological security as the key existential problematic, Bourdieu points out that people are basically motivated by a need for recognition. Having a designated place in the social world, an acknowledged position, a recognized achievement or a particular skill, serves to lessen the effects of existential *angst*, he suggests. In this sense, our finitude is assuaged by the mark we make in life. However, for the culturally excluded, misrecognition is the defining experience. In existential terms, it is tantamount to an abnegation of self.

Clearly, sensitivity to each of these areas, while of the utmost importance, is not enough. We must communicate this sensitivity to those who have enlisted our help. This process involves the key skills of helping: attending, listening, empathizing, probing and summarizing. These skills are the cornerstone of humanistic models of counselling and are, according to Egan, fundamental to problem-solving activities in all cultures (1998: 35).

Stage Four: Raising Awareness and Empowering

Having understood the nature of culture and reflected on its significance for self and others, the final stage of the model can now be articulated. In this stage, the

social worker extends the possibilities for unfettered critical examination of habitus, field and capital to the client. Elsewhere, this has been described as a process of conscientization: 'consciousness raising or conscientization involves the processes of reflecting on oppressive social structures to try to understand them and exploring ways of acting on the understanding' (Payne, 1997: 224). Hence, conscientization involves *praxis*. Bourdieu's theory has particular relevance here because it explains how oppressive structures become part of our mental world. Furthermore, the idea of social fields helps us to locate these structures spatially and fosters the idea that different stakes (or interests) are being fought for within them.

Conscientization might commence, then, with an explanation of these concepts, followed by an exploration of how they have affected life events and chances. For this to be meaningful, we will need to assist the client to focus on areas where inequality has been most felt. We might, for example, facilitate insight into the workings of the educational field, and how it has affected personal identity, social competence and educational achievement. Experiences related to social class would also form an essential part of this analysis. However, this should not be seen as a purely cognitive activity. For Bourdieu, habitus is literally embodied within physical presentation, movement and gesture. Finding ways to encourage bodily awareness of oppression is therefore a necessary if challenging facet of culturally sensitive social work. Gowdy (1994: 366) questions whether we can afford to neglect this activity: 'In a culture driven by a worldview that separates body, mind and soul, a demand for consciousness is one few people, especially members of oppressed groups, can meet. What happens to those who learn to deny their own sources of knowledge – their bodies, emotions, and intuitive voice?'

In carrying out this work, social workers must challenge fatalistic ideas which assume that change is impossible. It is important to remember that Bourdieu rejects structural determinism. Moreover, throughout the Western world lay people have an unparalleled access to debate and social influence in civil society. For instance, Giddens (1990: 38) refers to 'social practices being constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character'. In a similar vein, Habermas (1976) refers to a revival of the public sphere, Beck (1992) speaks of an 'unbinding of politics' and Castells (1997) highlights the ubiquity of resistant identities in the modern, technological world. But fatalism is often a result of labelling or pathologizing responses which become internalized within habitus. These negative dispositions, durable as they may be, should be challenged. One way of achieving this is to encourage the identification of a preferred habitus. The act of creating and reflecting on this idealized mind-set demonstrates the limitations of current dispositions. This technique is used to great effect by the Brazilian social pedagogue, Augusto Boal (1979), in his stratagem of the 'theatre of the oppressed'.

Conscientization might also be fostered through helping clients to analyse

formative fields in their lives. There are a number of critical questions fuelling this analysis. Who is in the field? What stakes or interests feature? What types of capital are being used and by whom? Are there any alliances? Where are the main divisions? Are there discernible contradictions between the various actors in the field and how are they manifest themselves? Young people leaving care might, for instance, scrutinize the employment field with these questions in mind. Their analysis might throw up a major contradiction between, on the one hand, legislative requirements for specialized training schemes for care leavers and, on the other, the absence of this resource.

There is another way in which conscientization might unfold. This involves a strategic use of capital (Lee et al., 1999). With an increasing emphasis on citizenship and rights discourses, service users and their carers have gained symbolic capital in the sense that their power to influence services and practice standards within the social care field has never been greater. However, this type of capital must be used strategically and will be maximized when it is collectivized or pooled. Thus, isolated individuals will make few inroads into a power-saturated field and so alliances with other service users should be fostered. Mullender and Ward's (1991) self-directed groupwork model offers a useful template for collective action in this respect. Collectivization might also mean drawing in specialist knowledge or, in Bourdieu's terms, cultural capital. Social work academics can offer so much in this domain, provided they adhere to Gramsci's (1971) prescription of the 'organic intellectual' who openly identifies with an oppressed class.

Conclusion

To conclude, how might we evaluate Bourdieu's theory of social action and its contribution to practice with the culturally excluded? In addressing this question Ritzer (1996: 545) remarks:

> Bourdieu offers a distinctive theory of the relationship between agency and structure within the context of a concern for the dialectical relationship between habitus and field. His theory is also distinguished by its focus on practice . . . and its refusal to engage in arid intellectualism. In that sense it represents a return to the Marxian concern for the relationship between theory and practice.

By focusing on the relationship between agency and structure in such a fecund and challenging way, Bourdieu's theory enables practitioners to gain an in-depth understanding of the nexus constituting the person in society. This understanding lies at the heart of anti-oppressive practice (Thompson, 1993), because oppression must be seen in the context of the interplay of a number of interrelated domains of experience starting with the personal, continuing to the cultural and culminating in the macro-, societal domain.

Dalrymple and Burke (1995) suggest that a dual focus on agency and structure in anti-oppressive work must be adequate at a number of levels. First, it

must promote self-knowledge for the practitioner tackling oppression. We can see how the second stage of the model meets this requirement by emphasizing the need for professional reflexivity. Second, it must engender an understanding of how oppression is produced and reproduced within groups, systems and structures. The first stage of the model, by focusing on the interrelated concepts of habitus, field and capital, helps us to link each of these areas to explain how action arises. Last, it must lead to culturally sensitive interventions, including research. Stages three and four give direction on action and make connections with a range of ideas within existing empowerment approaches.

It can be seen then that Bourdieu's theory makes a distinctive contribution to each of these. Indeed, he reminds us that culture is not benign but rather is a site where vested interests are played out and material and symbolic structures operate to marginalize those with few resources at their disposal. Furthermore, his work challenges us to reconsider the importance of social class and the structural imbalances that are implicit to the educational field. Finally, he shows how oppression is both an externalized and internalized phenomenon and that 'control, censorship and conformism are never more effective than when they are self-imposed' (Jenkins, 1992: 98).

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