

# Social Mobility: Contemporary Theoretical Considerations and the Constructivist Structuralism of Pierre Bourdieu

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In this research note we explore how the discipline of sociology could reconceptualise social mobility. Within sociology, Sorokin (1960) is often seen as the father of social mobility studies. Sorokin defined *social mobility* as the phenomenon of individuals' circulation within the social space, meaning any transition of an individual, object or social value from one social position to another. Sorokin argued that a fundamental factor in the social distribution of individuals is the material human itself, its physical and mental qualities, whether inherited or acquired. However, within this definition, how can you explain people's change in social mobility? Indeed, Sorokin's conceptualisation of social mobility obscures that not everyone has equal opportunities or begin their journey at the same starting point. We suggest in this paper that conceptualisations of social mobility need to take into account dynamic and fluid conceptualisation of social mobility that recognises the inherent power relations within social structures. We use the theoretical insights of Pierre Bourdieu to generate new considerations for the analysis of social mobility, in a field of study that is characterised by deterministic approaches focused on quantitative data and that underestimates the complexity of social mobility as a process (Friedman, 2014, 2016; Horvat, 2003; Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Horvat & Davis, 2011; Lee & Kramer, 2013; Lehmann, 2009).

## Elements to build new paths of research on social mobility

Bourdieu built a theoretical-methodological framework where the different categories of analysis function as a system where each of them can only be understood by reference to the others (Baranger, 2012; Gutiérrez, 2005). Within Bourdieu's theoretical approach are conceptual tools such as social space, field, capital, habitus, practices, domination and symbolic violence, which are mutually linked as parts of a whole and provide instruments of analysis that need to be considered together within the theoretical system that they configure (Baranger, 2012; Gutiérrez, 2005).

### *The social space as a field and the field as an object of study*

According to Bourdieu (1977), every society is presented as a multidimensional and asymmetric place that is governed by a series of dynamic forces through 'fields', which are defined as relational social spaces where agents are distributed in a series of social positions. For Bourdieu, a field is determined by what is at stake in it, normally a specific type of capital that is the very condition of its operation. Bourdieu strips

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the concept of capital of its economic connotation and leads it to all kinds of resources that can be accumulated and used in different markets as an instrument of power (Bourdieu, 1998; Bourdieu & Gutiérrez, 2010, p. 12). These *capitals* are presented in four different forms—economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital—the last corresponding to the symbolic effects of capital when it obtains recognition and legitimacy (Bourdieu et al., 2001; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). A *field* is an objective structure of differences in which the system of positions of the agents is determined by the distribution of these forms of power contained in capital. It is important to highlight that within the field, an agent's location in it is not necessarily defined by the merits of the individuals, but by the trajectory followed by the family or rather their location within social space (Bourdieu, 1977). In this way, it is not only possible to think about an agent's position in the social space and their movements in it synchronously, but also diachronically (Bourdieu et al., 2001; Bourdieu & Gutiérrez, 2010).

Emphasising the historical dimension (diachronic and synchronic character not only of the fields but also of the agents) allows us to recognise the dynamism of the social space as a field of struggle that seeks to preserve or transform the forces contained therein. Therefore, each field is also constituted in a space of conflict where those who are inclined towards conservation strategies tend to defend orthodoxy and the legitimate principle of domination (Bourdieu, 2002). To emphasise the importance of this element of friction, which is a product of conflict in the theory of the fields, Bourdieu proposes the existence of a 'field of power' as a kind of meta field in which the encounter between agents occurs (Bourdieu et al., 2001). The exercise of domination in current societies depends on a multiplicity of 'elites' possessing different forms of capital that constantly reinvent the mechanisms of legitimation and reproduction of the social order (Bourdieu, 1977). Within Bourdieu's approach, he seeks to: (1) define the position of the social field under study in relation to the field of power, (2) establish the relationships between the positions that structure the field, and (3) analyse the different systems of dispositions that the agents have acquired through the internalisation of the social conditions in their trajectories (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2005). These theoretical innovations are important for understanding social mobility. However, we would argue that is perhaps his concept of habitus that has the most potential to contribute to new understandings of social mobility.

### *The social space as the cradle of habitus*

The concept of *habitus* has been taken by Bourdieu from classical philosophy to "refer to the set of dispositions to act, perceive, value, feel and think in a certain way rather than another, dispositions that have been internalised by the individual in the course of their history" (Gutiérrez, 2005, p. 68). The habitus is considered a social product. It is not acquired innately or naturally but responds to the characteristics of the position that agents occupy in a specific field within social space (Bourdieu et al., 2001). Agents are inclined to accept the social world as it is, to see it as natural, without rebelling against it or opposing it with possible worlds, or at least different ones. An agent's sense of position within the field is often marked or maintained, respected or enforced (Bourdieu, 1990). Habitus becomes a meeting place for the individual and the social insofar as it intersects objectivity and subjectivity; it is contained in the body and at the same time connected to the outside world. The habitus constitutes the connection point of Bourdieu's constructivist structuralism.

On the one hand, the habitus originates within an individual's oldest dispositions from socialisation, such the family environment. However, habitus also involves tacit knowledge that is collective, the product of a specific group of agents who share similar conditions of existence. This social

inheritance of the habitus offers the group one of the most effective means of perpetuating itself as such, transcending the limits of biological finitude and thus safeguarding its distinctive way of existing (Bourdieu, 2011). If the reproduction of the dispositions within the collective habitus adjusts and varies according to the position occupied by the agents within social space, the habitus then is constituted as an embodied structure resulting from the lasting experience of a position in the social space (Bourdieu & Mizraji, 2000). The habitus, therefore, gives rise to social practices, which are understood only from their double dimension: an 'objective' meaning and a 'lived' meaning (Gutiérrez, 2003). According to this understanding, social mobility could not be analysed without understanding the social structure that makes it possible and the characteristics of the agent that executes this social mobility within the field.

### *Social practices as a product of the field/habitus relationship*

Bourdieu (1998) believes it is essential to consider the position of the agent and the trajectory of that position within the field. But it is also necessary to examine the social structures that shape the habitus and that are embodied by the agent that produces the practices (Gutiérrez, 2005). Consequently, if there is an alteration of the explanatory factors of the practices, the habitus loses practical sense within the field. Furthermore, social practices are analysed in terms of strategies implemented by the agent to improve the conditions of their position, preserving or improving it and defending the instruments that allow the agent to stay in the game. Bourdieu thus intends to rescue the capacity for action, invention and improvisation of the social agent in the dynamics of the fields of which they are apart (Bourdieu, 1998; Bourdieu & Gutiérrez, 2010). The practices, whether individual or collective, are characterised by being inhabited by a common sense of *doxa* (unquestioned beliefs). Practices become *doxa* through their conformity and their constancy over time (Bourdieu, 2007; Bourdieu & Gutiérrez, 2010).

### *Social mobility*

Bourdieu's theoretical and empirical development begins with the fundamental idea that positions within fields are shaped by the relationship between two dynamic principles of habitus/structure. On the one hand, a field is an objective structure that through the distribution of capital, guarantees its reproduction; on the other hand other, the reproduction is also achieved through the habitus to provide a set of strategies that are dynamic but are perpetually socially reproduced (Bourdieu, 2011).

For one's social position to move, it is necessary to understand the habitus/structure that reproduces its *doxa*. Bourdieu insists that belonging to the field and the position occupied by the agent depends on specific social conditions that legitimise the privileges that are transformed from social inheritance into individual grace or personal merit, precisely through the discourse of their naturalness. (Bourdieu et al., 2001). The success of this discourse of naturalness lies in the strength of the system to reproduce these perception and appreciation schemes. This harmony between the categories of perception of the social world and the division of the established order within the field contributes to the preservation of the system of positions (Bourdieu, 1998).

Bourdieu (1998) states that the preservation of the system of positions is due to the mutual relationship between social structures and mental structures. For example, one's own first experience of the social world becomes one's *doxa*. Within the context of social mobility, an agent's *doxic* experience makes mobility difficult. We mean this in the sense that the agent would tend to eliminate any type of ambition that would allow them to move at least upwards, as their social position becomes *doxa* and is apart of their habitus, and also how those within the field view them. However, Bourdieu et al. (2001)

goes against the dominant discourse on social mobility, and suggest that social position can change— one’s position within the field is part of a social ‘trajectory’; that is, a series of positions successively occupied by the same agent or the same group in a social space over time.

The analysis of social trajectories seeks to analyse why some agents have different life trajectories even though they are endowed with the same capital and habitus within the field. For the analysis of social mobility, it is pertinent to recognise that agents do not move at random within social space because the forces that create the structure of the field are imposed on them. It follows that a certain volume of inherited capital or power corresponds to a bundle of probable trajectories for the agent. The passage from one trajectory to another is periodically dependent on collective and individual events such as moments of crisis and fortunate or unfortunate coincidences. Additionally, not all arrival positions are equally possible for all starting points. This can be evidenced by cases in which agents originating from the same family develop different relationships with the world (Bourdieu, 1998).

### **Determining elements of social mobility from a Bourdieusian approach**

The classic studies of social mobility describe an increase in the educational level and the improvement of the conditions of occupation compared with the previous generation’s as indicators of upward mobility. However, Bourdieu’s understanding implies that not only should the possession and use of the different forms of capital by agents be considered, but also their habitus as a factor that influences the perpetuation of inequality (Bourdieu & Boltanski, 2009). Therefore, conceptualisations of social mobility need to take into the account the number of factors that influence an agent’s social trajectory, such as symbolic violence, domination, symbolic systems and habitus acquired through intra- and intergenerational mobility processes in each social space. Understanding that power dynamics play an important part in understanding social mobility is important. As power within social space leads to a social construction of the world that validates the social space, a discourse by those who are in a dominant position give it meaning, or as Bourdieu and Passeron say, the social space could become a “sociodicy— a social order that is justified and maintains the distribution of power and resources and its consequent privileges (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1995).

Bourdieu (2011) also notes that power within social space is not limited to economic or political power, but includes also symbolic power. Within fields, the ‘symbolic’ violence that is exercised upon an agent is often complicit in the maintenance of social orders (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) suggest that symbolic violence is an instrument of domination and has a key role in the production and distribution of social inequalities. Thus, the constitutive power relations within fields become internalised into the habitus, which develops a sense of social orientation (sense of one’s place within social space) for the agents, from an image of reality, or that experience of that world, that allows one to act as if the structure of the world is the natural order of things (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 470). Within such a context, social mobility can be limited. So how can we overcome this theoretical paralysis?

### **Conclusion—new research pathways**

Within the discipline of sociology, there is a strong tendency for empirical works that include social stratification and mobility processes to be supported by an analysis of class trajectories. However, within our post-COVID times, there is a need to better understand the complexity of society. We suggest that social mobility must be understood as an intra- and intergenerational process that depends on multiple factors articulated with each other, grouped into three levels: macro-, meso- and micro-social (Bertaux &

Thompson, 2017; Sautu, 2003). The macro-social level is represented by the structure of opportunities and limitations of a society in each socio-historical context. The meso-social level is made up of the social relations framework of the individuals; that is, the social interactions where lifestyles are configured. And the micro-social level refers to individual behaviours, values, motivations and beliefs and the constitutive elements of human agency. This tripartite structure incorporating into the theoretical approach of Pierre Bourdieu, we would argue, can lead to new insights into social mobility within sociology.

Bourdieu's field theory represents a viable option to advance new research pathways and influences an emerging vision in the study of social mobility. Analytical categories such as habitus, social and symbolic capital and social space represent theoretical tools to understand and explain the different iterations of the mobility experience in people's social trajectories. It is not surprising that increasing social mobility is part of the main social policy objectives of contemporary governments. However, this vision does not make sense, unless policies take into the account the structural, but also embodied, nature of an agent's experience. If we are to understand the complexity of social mobility within sociology more completely, we need to critically engage and conceptualise social mobility as a social practice that must:

1. reveal the characteristics of the field of power that controls the relations of domination
2. reveal the mechanisms and instruments of power created and implemented that ensure the permanence of the established order in each field within social space, and
3. understand the history of the system of objective relations (functioning of capital in time) for agents, and the history incorporated in the agents in the form of habitus, especially over time.

If these elements are not used to conceptualise and understand social mobility, sociology will find it hard explain social mobility to key audiences, such as policymakers who are seeking to address inequities and inequalities in our societies.

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