## Bourdieu: the habitus and field theory

The notion of autonomous consumer power or authority – together with the populist perspective that taste cannot be accounted for (see discussion of Ang in Chapter 6) – is critiqued in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, especially *Dis-tinction* (1984). His theory of 'the habitus' (Bourdieu 1977) aims to show how consumer taste – in clothes, music, television shows, and so on – is not a purely personal choice but, rather, is structured according to social circum-stances. **Habitus theory** is based on the conviction that 'although diverse and varied, consumption practices are socially structured' (MacKay 1997: 5). Any individual's habitus, therefore, simultaneously produces and reproduces 'a stable and group-specific way of seeing or making sense of the social world; in other words, a *distinctive mode of cultural consumption*' (Lee 1993: 34). Operating below the level of individual consciousness, the habitus is at work in taken-for-granted consumer tastes for food, films, and so on, as well as in one's bodily expressions and dress (Lury 1996: 85). In short, the habitus is an invisible classificatory system that shapes consumer tastes. However, this is only half the story. The habitus is not – like ideology – a fixed set of values that filters down from the ruling classes. On the contrary, the habitus is both a structured and a structuring principle – we make our habituses while at the same time being made by them. As Bourdieu states, the habitus is a 'strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations' which is 'laid down in each agent by his [*sic*] earliest upbringing' (Bourdieu 1977: 72, 81). Note the term 'agent' here. Like Gid-dens's theory of structuration (see Chapter 5), habitus theory tries to under-stand the correspondence between social structures (i.e. institutional power) and individual agency. The phrase 'we are what we eat' gives agency to us –we decide whether to be healthy or not – but, at the same time, the habitus determines that what we eat is not entirely of our own choosing. To use Bourdieu's words: 'Through taste, an agent has what he likes because he likes what he has' (Bourdieu 1984: 175).

For Bourdieu, taste is manifested in one's habitus by a set of predisposi-tions that each individual learns to adopt from an early age in relation to their levels of economic and cultural capital. In terms of economic capital, we are *predisposed* to act (and consume things) in certain ways depending on whe-ther we are born into wealth or poverty. Economic capital, of course, is an important structuring marker of consumer taste. However, money is not the only marker of taste. What Bourdieu calls 'cultural capital' also influences an individual agent's predispositions. Cultural capital consists of resources that one is able to draw on in order to demonstrate competence in social practices (such as speaking a language, eating a meal, reading a book, dancing to music, and so on). Bourdieu refers to 'The very close relationship linking cultural practices . . . to educational capital (measured by qualifications) and, secon-darily, to social origin (measured by father's occupation)' (Bourdieu 1984: 13). In other words, levels of cultural capital are closely linked to education and occupation (social class). Those individuals with high cultural capital are likely to be well educated as well as wealthy, while those with low cultural

capital are less well educated and less affluent consumers. Central to Bourdieu's ideas about the habitus and its social structuring of taste, however, is his claim that despite the close relationship between economic and cultural capital, the two forms of capital are nevertheless distinct and not inextricably linked. For example, a university student has high cultural capital (especially once they have graduated) but is likely to be low in economic capital (unless they have wealthy parents). See Figure 9.4 for other examples of occupational types that are low in economic but high in cultural capital, and vice versa.

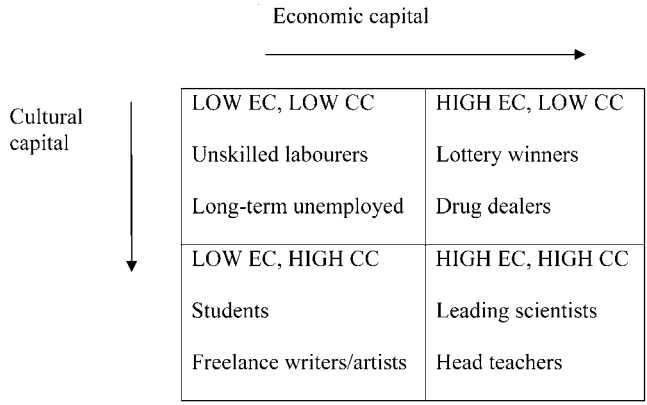


**Figure 9.4** Some occupational classifications based on levels of economic capital (EC) and cultural capital (CC)

Bourdieu (1984) argues that economic and cultural capital are the key social markers through which the habitus works to classify consumer tastes. In practice, this means that the habitus structures the relationships we are *voluntarily* predisposed to form with others. We include and exclude others in our social networks based on a sharing of cultural tastes (liking the same music, sport, and so on) and economic circumstances (being of similar social class), while at the same time being included and excluded by others according to the same classifications. Bourdieu's concept of 'social capital' – propensity for individuals of similar economic background to bond with each other through friendships, business dealings, and so on – is associated with this process but is a different form of capital again (see Bourdieu 1986). These practices of inclusion and exclusion – what Bourdieu means by 'distinction' – explain why, generally, it is possible to classify (i.e. predict) an individual's predisposed tastes based purely on information about their economic status and educational history. For example, Bourdieu (1984) argues that consumers with high economic and high cultural capital are far more likely to enjoy classical music than consumers in the lower classes who are less well

educated, the latter being more prone to like pop music. This distinction is not just a coincidence or a personal matter, but an outcome of the structurally marked classifications (i.e. habituses) that consumers are predisposed to practise in relations with each other. In short, we associate with similar others according to social expectations that we are predisposed to fulfil. Despite endless opportunities, we do not – on the whole – associate with individuals of a different social class and educational background.

Bourdieu's theory of the habitus is informed by survey data on consumer tastes in his native France. While his theoretical discussion of this data is exceptionally sophisticated and has become canonical in sociology and other disciplines, including media studies, the data analysis itself is questionable. The habitus is premised on the idea that consumer tastes are closely related to occupational status. While occupations may well affect tastes, they do not necessarily determine economic status. Home ownership and the value of one's property, for example, are other determining factors in economic status, as well as inherited wealth. This problem of 'measurement' is widely regarded as a major weakness of the survey method *per se*. Furthermore, Bourdieu's avid search for cultural distinctions often distorts a situation in which such distinctions are slight between different social classes or barely exist at all. In the case of music consumers:

> 41 per cent of classical music albums are purchased by those in social classes AB, pointing in the direction of a Bourdieu distinction paradigm. However, only 17 per cent of the albums purchased by AB social classes are of this type. They are far outnumbered by the purchase of rock and pop albums which constitute 52 per cent of purchases.
>
> (Longhurst and Savage 1996: 288)

This example of how Bourdieu's data analysis can be interpreted with different outcomes underscores how his survey research lacks a complementary ethnographic component to understand broader, more meaningful practices in the contexts generated by everyday consumer tastes. Perhaps not surprisingly, de Certeau doubts the claims made by Bourdieu about the structuring structures of the habitus: 'In order to assume that the basis has such a stability, it must be unverifiable, invisible' (de Certeau 1984: 58). Invisible structures are clearly acrimonious in relation to de Certeau's notion of consumer tactics that are non-formalized practices 'neither as deterministic nor as rooted in social class as Bourdieu tends to assert' (Gardiner 2000: 170).

As well as habitus theory, Bourdieu's (1993) **field theory** is a related but somewhat different perspective on media and cultural consumption – although it is principally concerned with media and cultural production. A field is the site of practices, struggles and possibilities enacted in various

arenas of cultural production. For example, there are literary fields, educational fields, media fields, and so on. Each field is characterized by 'the structure of average chances of access to the different positions ... and the dispositions of each agent' (Bourdieu 1993: 64). To paraphrase, each field has its own hierarchy of positions (trainees, executives, managers, directors, and so on) that function to restrict, regulate and reproduce certain types and methods of cultural production. However, each field of cultural production also brings certain dispositions – that is, corresponding habituses – that are adopted by producers so as to effectively shape what is produced and ultimately consumed. Field (positions) and the habitus (dispositions), in their 'astonishingly close correspondence', constitute a 'sense of social direction which orients agents' (Bourdieu 1993: 64). For example, risk-taking in fields of cultural production is rare. The positions and predispositions of producers are oriented against taking risks so as not to threaten existing consumer uptake of their products. However, risk-taking – typical of avant-garde production – tends to produce more daring and original cultural work. Unfortunately, 'The propensity to move towards the economically most risky positions, and above all the capacity to persist in them ... seem to depend to a large extent on possession of substantial economic and social capital' (Bourdieu 1993: 67). So innovative media and cultural production, in practice, is structured by economic and social constraints. Producers who occupy the more junior positions in a given field, therefore, are not predisposed to 'sacrifice everything' for a risky venture, given that they do not have the necessary economic capital to cushion the blow of failure, or the necessary social capital to build up contacts for the sales and distribution of their products.

How does field theory inform consumer practices? For Bourdieu, the self-generating, self-regulating fields – and corresponding habituses – of cultural production tend to mean that consumers are subject to the same products from the same producers (i.e. large corporations). Even the large corporations high in economic and social capital, however, take limited risks in what they produce because their positions of power remain in the balance wherever there is competition. In the journalistic field, for example, 'competition for consumers tends to take the form of competition for the newest news (''scoops'')' (Bourdieu 1996: 71). Market forces weigh heavily on the journalistic and especially the television fields. In turn, individual journalists feel this 'weight exerted by the journalistic field' which shows how 'the economy weighs on all fields of cultural production' (Bourdieu 1996: 56). These market forces are not only felt by journalists either: 'Enslaved by audience ratings, television imposes market pressures on the supposedly free and enlightened consumers' (Bourdieu 1996: 67). So consumers – who determine what is produced in fields such as television – are oppressed by the very logic (i.e. audience ratings) that Fiske cites as evidence of consumer power. Risks are generally not taken, so audience ratings are tested out on risk-free practices of

media and cultural production, some of which are inevitably measured as successes and reproduced across all positions within a field. The journalistic field's obsession with audience ratings, likewise, weighs on other fields. For instance, 'Political success increasingly depends on adapting to the demands of the journalistic field' (Bourdieu 1996: 5). Furthermore, the political and journalistic fields effectively collaborate in their 'capacity to impose a way of seeing the world' (Bourdieu 1996: 22). Television is vital for politicians as a means of conveying their positions in struggles with opposition parties. As Herman and Chomsky claim (see Chapter 7), journalists tend to favour mainstream political sources of which they are familiar. Similarly, Bourdieu argues that television consumers are forced to see a rather narrow, mainstream political view of the world as an outcome of fields of cultural production.

Like Bourdieu, Nick Couldry is sceptical of theories that overstate the capacity of consumers to deflect the weight exerted by the media field. For instance, while sharing their interest in the role of media in everyday life, he criticizes Abercrombie and Longhurst's neglect of media power: 'they write sometimes as if underlying issues of power relating to the media had simply disappeared' (Couldry 2000b: 21). By contrast, Couldry is keen to explore 'the inequality in the power of ''naming'' social reality which the media themselves constitute' (Couldry: 2000b: 22). In *Media Rituals* (2003), Couldry draws on Bourdieu's field theory in his attempt to explain 'how the social world is ''mediated'' through a media system that has very particular power-effects, and how the actions and beliefs of all of us are caught up in this process' (Couldry 2003: 1–2). However, media power to name and represent social reality is not fixed and centralized. On the contrary, Couldry refers to the myth of the mediated centre – the idea that *the media* (in common phraseology) is concentrated in the hands of dominant ideological interests – and he claims that media rituals are 'condensed forms of action where category distinctions and boundaries related to the myth of the mediated centre are worked upon with particular intensity' (Couldry 2003: 47) in order to naturalize media power. Couldry's theory of media rituals, therefore, demands a broader understanding of media power and its role in our everyday life experiences. An important set of media rituals, for example, seek to reinforce the myth that television and other media present (unmediated) reality. 'Liveness' is a ritual category at work in 'reality TV' because the notion of 'real time', by definition, implicates audiences in the immediacy of what media present to them. As such, liveness 'guarantees a potential connection to our shared social realities as they are happening' (Couldry 2003: 96–7). As well as liveness, Couldry (2003) discusses media pilgrimages – for example, fans visiting filming locations for television shows – and mediated self-disclosure performed, say, in the ritual space of talk shows like *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (1996–), as other categories of media rituals that reveal dynamic social processes at work in power relations between audiences, texts and institutions.