

**Habitus, Symbolic Violence, and Reflexivity:
Relevance of Bourdieu's Theories to Social Work**

Social Welfare Theory Paper
(Theories of the Welfare State)

Wendy Wiegmann

Prepared in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
of the Doctor of Philosophy Degree in the School of Social Welfare
University of California, Berkeley

Prepared under the Supervision of James Midgley, Ph. D.,
University of California, Berkeley - School of Social Welfare

Fall 2013

Abstract

Sociologists have used Pierre Bourdieu's theories of habitus and symbolic violence to describe and explain a number of sociological problems. In the field of social work, authors have also argued that Bourdieu's theories carry implications for practice and policy. What has been missing from social work discussions of Bourdieu, however, is an examination of the power relations and symbolic violence built into the interactions between workers and clients, and the possible negative impact of these on the habitus of the populations social workers serve. Following an examination of Bourdieu's theories, including major critiques of his work, this paper will discuss the relevance of Bourdieu's theoretical cannon to social work. The paper will argue that social workers must be aware of the role that they play in adding to a client's experiences of symbolic violence, and offer suggestions as to how reflexive and relational social work can help workers reduce this impact. This paper will also explore the role of social workers in addressing social inequalities by examining Bourdieu's writings in terms of micro and macro approaches to disparity.

Introduction: Bourdieu's Life

Pierre Bourdieu was born on August 1, 1930 in Denguin, a tiny village in rural southwestern France. Bourdieu's father was a sharecropper and then a postman, who never completed secondary education (Grenfell, 2004; Waquant, 2002, 2008). Although Bourdieu's mother was able to attend school until the age of sixteen, she was never able to move farther than Pau, the capital city of the rural region where she and Bourdieu's father would ultimately live. To give him opportunities that they did not have, Bourdieu's parents sent him to a boarding school in Paris to complete his secondary education. As documented thoroughly by Grenfell (2004), Bourdieu's experiences in boarding school were often miserable. Bourdieu described life there as cold and sterile. His rural upbringing and regional accent made him an outcast; teachers dominated students; boarders turned on each other when faced with threats and punishments; and class played a powerful and oppressive role. Despite these difficulties, Bourdieu also found school life to be "enchanted," and he discovered an intellectual potential and drive that would propel him throughout his life.

After secondary school, Bourdieu received a state scholarship to attend a well-respected preparatory school – the Lycée Louis-le-Grand – in order to prepare for the examinations to enter the exclusive and prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS; Waquant, 2002). Similar to his secondary school, Bourdieu found class divisions, brutalities, and hostility at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand. Nevertheless, Bourdieu applied himself to his studies, and, in 1951, was accepted into the ENS – the "traditional home of the French intellectual elite" (Waquant, 2002). At the ENS, students were given a high degree of autonomy, but philosophy was considered the most prestigious discipline, and the existential theories of Jean-Paul Sartre were the primary focus of many students (Grenfell, 2004; Waquant, 2002, 2008). Although Bourdieu reports (in Honneth,

Kocyba, & Schwibs, 1986) that he was not particularly impressed with the philosophical traditions that were popular during that time, the field of sociology was considered a place for “failed philosophers,” and Bourdieu graduated as an *agregé* in philosophy in 1955 (Grenfell, 2004; Waquant, 2002, 2008).

After graduation from ENS, Bourdieu was conscripted to military service in Algeria, which, at that time, was fighting for independence from France (Grenfell, 2004; Waquant, 2002). According to Waquant (2002), Bourdieu’s first-hand encounter with the realities of the war and Algerian nationalism changed his intellectual fate forever:

It aroused his interest in Algerian society from a political as well as a scientific standpoint and triggered his practical conversion from philosophy to social science. His first book *The Sociology of Algeria* ... was an impeccably scholarly study synthesizing historical, ethnological, and sociological knowledge ... From the beginning, he mated ethnography with statistics, [and] microscopic interpretation with macroscopic explanation ... Gradually, Bourdieu was turning into an anthropologist. (pp. 550-551)

After his active service ended, Bourdieu remained in Algeria as the war continued, working at Algiers University (1958-1960), taking photographs, and interviewing people throughout the towns and countryside (Bourdieu in Honneth, et al., 1986; Grenfell, 2004; Waquant, 2002). In 1960, a pro-colonial coup forced Bourdieu to go back to Paris (Waquant, 2002), where he did not return to philosophy, but turned instead to the social sciences:

I wanted to do something useful ... Maybe I wanted to be useful in order to overcome my guilty conscience about being merely a participant observer in this appalling war ... I wanted to do something useful and earn a living ... I could not be content with reading left-wing newspapers or signing petitions, I had to do something concrete as a scientist. (Bourdieu in Honneth, et al., 1986, p. 39)

Bourdieu took up a position as an Assistant Professor at the Sorbonne (1960-1961) and later at the University of Lille (1961-1964), where, following the pattern that began in Algiers, Bourdieu’s scholarly and instructional interests turned to anthropology and sociology (Waquant, 2002). Simultaneously, Bourdieu became the editor of “Le Sens Commun,” and began a series

of sociology seminars at the ENS. Throughout that time, Bourdieu analyzed the field data he collected during the war and from the frequent trips he continued to take to Algeria (Waquant, 2002).

In 1964, Bourdieu became Director of Studies at the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales and in 1968 he founded Le Centre de Sociologie Européenne (CSE). At CSE, Bourdieu published a number of books and articles laying out the conceptual terms central to his sociological theory: *field*, *capital*, *habitus*, *doxa*, and *symbolic violence* (Grenfell, 2004; Waquant, 2002). These concepts were most fully elucidated in Bourdieu's "master-works," *Distinction* (1979/1980) and *The Logic of Practice* (1980/1990). Other notable publications include *The State Nobility* (1989/1996), where Bourdieu examines the major forms of power governing society – political, intellectual, bureaucratic, and economic – and the way that elite educational institutions feed into these power systems; and *Acts of Resistance* (1998/1998), where Bourdieu criticizes neo-liberalism and the withdrawal of the state from public service. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (1992), written jointly by Bourdieu and Loic Waquant, documents discussions Bourdieu had with American students at the University of Chicago in a special seminar on *reflexive sociology* and provides an overview of his theoretical work. Bourdieu was made famous by editing *The Weight of the World* (1993/2000), a book which explores social suffering throughout the world – from youth in New York barrios to a peasant family in Algeria, while providing an illustration of the use of *reflexive sociology* in the field. In 1993, Bourdieu was awarded the gold medal from the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in France. Bourdieu died of cancer on January 23, 2002.

Chapter 1: Bourdieu's Theoretical Contribution

A number of intellectual trends came together to influence Bourdieu's theories. Under the guidance of Jean-Paul Sartre, French intellectual thought in the 1930s and 1940s was dominated by existentialism, an examination of humanity that focused on the first-hand experiences of humans and their interactions with the outside world (Grenfell, 2004). As thoroughly laid out in Jeremy Lane's critical text (2000), Bourdieu's theories were, in part, born out of a disagreement with Sartre's conceptualization of free choice, particularly as applied to the Algerian peasantry and sub-proletariat during French occupation. In his analysis (1960/1963), Sartre proposed that Algeria's peasantry would ultimately turn into a revolutionary force, an opinion shared by Frantz Fanon (1961/2004). This change would come about as oppressed individuals became aware of their feelings of alienation, ultimately turning these feelings into "revolutionary praxis" (Lane, 2000, p. 25). Bourdieu rejected this possibility, theorizing that since the Algerian underclass were preoccupied with daily subsistence, they were incapable of making abstract plans for their future, a necessary condition for revolutionary action. Furthermore, Bourdieu argued that the Algerian underclass were incapable of a reflexive awareness of their social conditions due to an internalized certainty that their social status was natural and indisputable. Contrary to Sartre's belief that consciousness of their condition would compel Algerian peasants to take revolutionary action, Bourdieu believed that the "cycle of simple reproduction could only be broken by changes to the objective conditions which structured the *habitus*, and not vice versa" (Lane, 2000, p. 107).

Following the end of World War II, many intellectuals turned to theories that could guide social reconstruction as well as make sense of the social, political and economic devastation caused by the War. Structuralism, a school of thought which explains the interrelatedness of the

individual and overarching structures, and Marxism, a particular form of structuralism which describes social structures in terms of means of production, seemed to satisfy many theorists on this issue (Grenfell, 2004, p. 17). Through his conceptualization of *habitus*, Bourdieu departed from the structuralists as well. According to Bourdieu's theory, individuals are neither totally free to make choices nor fully controlled by objective social laws (Bourdieu in Ovenden, 2000). Instead, they incorporate into their *habitus* an inarguable sense of what can or cannot be achieved, based on intuitions gained through past experience (Bourdieu, 1972/1977). While in part created by overarching structures, these intuitions are undeniably personal.

Bourdieu made them more personal by adding to his conceptualization of *habitus* the aspect of *embodiment*, a characteristic originally described by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Grenfell, 2004). As described by Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962), an individual does not type or dance by employing a second-by-second set of logical rules. Instead, individuals type and dance without consciousness of how, but by employing a rote physical knowledge; the body simply engages in typing or dancing actions. In a similar manner, Bourdieu's conceptualization of *habitus* is also *embodied* – individuals do not simply believe or think within certain structural boundaries – they “feel” confined by them, and are incapable of thinking outside them (Bourdieu, 1972/1977).

Thus, Bourdieu was not satisfied with the externally focused description of the world offered by structuralism, or with the internal picture painted by existentialism (Bourdieu, 1989). Instead, Bourdieu's theories attempt to describe how the power structures in which a person exists, and the amount of influence an individual has within those power structures, ultimately affects the individual's understanding of himself and his own worth. This approach, which can be summed up as the “externalization of internality and the internalization of externality” (Grenfell, 2004, p. 27), relies on a number of conceptual tools which will be described below.

Field and Capital

According to Bourdieu, in their social lives individuals participate, and are defined by, the arenas, networks, and social spaces where they exist (Bourdieu, in Eagleton, 1994; Waquant, 2008). Otherwise known as *fields*, Bourdieu described these social spaces in language similar to that of a game: “battlegrounds” with “stakes,” “rules of the game,” “power relations,” “common interests,” and “trump cards” (Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu in Eagleton, 1994; Bourdieu & Waquant, 1992). In addition, *fields* have recognizable boundaries – for example, the professional (various professions), personal (families, social networks, residence), and political (administrative institutions, political agencies). Some of the more common fields found in Bourdieu’s work include the cultural, economic, intellectual, bureaucratic, and power fields. According to Bourdieu, fields also include sub-fields. For example, the intellectual field may include the sub-fields of arts and social sciences; or in the case of the bureaucratic field, sub-fields may include the welfare and penal “arms” of the state (Waquant, 2010).

The “stakes” “power relations” and “common interests” inherent within *fields* revolve around Bourdieu’s notion of *capital*. As described by Bourdieu, *capital* is any resource in a given social arena that enables an individual to benefit from participation within the arena (Bourdieu, 1979/1980, 1986; Waquant, 2002, 2008). *Capital* comes in three major forms: economic (material and financial assets), cultural (education, accent, clothing, behavior, and objects such as books and art), and social (networks with well-placed individuals) (Bourdieu, 1979/1980, 1986, 1989). As defined by Bourdieu (1992), *symbolic capital* is best understood as a trait of favorability, held by any of the three primary forms when they are recognized as legitimate. Bourdieu’s theory holds that *capital* can only have value when there is social and cultural agreement, and is determined by the *field* and the hierarchy of *fields* in which it exists.

In addition, the amount of *capital* available for any one individual also depends on the *field*.

Bourdieu's theory contends that there is always competition for *capital* because it can only have value when it is scarce and unevenly distributed. Thus, competition is an essential component of *capital*, and exists within *fields* and between them – individuals are in a constant struggle to assert particular forms of *capital*, gain access to and control them, and to devalue other forms of *capital* (Bourdieu & Wacziarg, 1992).

Habitus, Embodiment, and Doxa

With his concept of *habitus*, Bourdieu developed an analysis of the interactions between social structures, culture, and the body (Ignatow, 2009). According to Bourdieu's theory, an individual's *habitus* is comprised of the unconscious schemata, acquired through perpetual exposure to social conditioning, through which we perceive, judge, and act in the world (Bourdieu, 1972/1977; Wacziarg, 2008). Schemata, a term developed by Jean Piaget in the mid-1920s, describes the structures by which individuals' thoughts are organized. According to Piaget's theory (2006), through the use of schemata, most new situations do not require conscious processing. Instead, people organize new experiences within their mind's organizational structure. Similarly, Bourdieu's definition of *habitus* represents an instinctual understanding of new events based on previous experience. Bourdieu describes the *embodiment* of these understandings insofar as an individual's response to the world may be physical as well as mental (demonstrated through posture, bearing, demeanor, accent, eating conventions, and aesthetic preferences), and the body internalizes the individual's experiences in the form of likes, dislikes, and personal dispositions (Bourdieu, 1972/1977, 1979/1980). As the common point of contact between past influences and present experiences, *habitus* is at once structured – by the social forces that produced it – and structuring: it gives form and coherence to new experiences

(Bourdieu, 1972/1977, 1989; Waquant, 2008). Bourdieu also theorized that while the *habitus* is capable of adapting to new stimuli, it is also extremely stable, with a fixed tendency to act within preexisting limits and toward specific responses (Grenfell, 2004).

According to Waquant (2008), by formulating the concepts of *field*, *capital*, and *habitus*, Bourdieu was able to redefine in sociological terms the notion of *doxa*. Originally conceptualized by Edmund Husserl, *doxa* involves a practical sense of what does or does not constitute a real possibility in the world (Crossley, 2001; Lane, 2000; Myles, 2004). According to Bourdieu's (1972/1977) theory, there is a natural fit between individuals' *habitus* and the *fields* in which they exist. As a result of this reciprocal fit, individuals develop a "common sense" of what is doable and thinkable (or unthinkable) within society, and perceive these as being self-evident and natural. This "common sense" is defined as the orthodoxy or *doxa* of the *field*. Anything outside of a particular way of acting is unorthodox, a challenge to the status quo, and is assumed to be forbidden, even when the status quo is oppressive or detrimental to the individual (Waquant, 2008). Hence, without even being aware of it, individuals develop an assumed knowledge about the "the established cosmological and political order [which] is perceived not as arbitrary, that is, as one possible order among others, but as a self-evident and natural order" (Everett, 2002, p. 66).

Symbolic Violence

Following from the conceptualization of *doxa* is the idea of *symbolic violence*, which exists when *doxa* produces or sustains an unequal distribution of *capital* (Everett, 2002). By adopting the status quo as obvious and appropriate, even when it is hurtful to them, individuals position themselves within the structure of society, further legitimizing and solidifying it (Bourdieu & Waquant, 1992; Bourdieu in Eagleton, 1992; Waquant, 2008). Furthermore, having

accepted as legitimate the established (inequitable) social order and their position within it, individuals who are powerless and dominated believe the *doxa* which attributes blame to themselves for their subordinate position (Bourgois, 2001; Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009). In effect, individuals within the underclass come to believe that they deserve their underclass status. Thus, the “violence” within *symbolic violence* refers to the physical domination that is replaced or made purposeless because the individual sees the existing social order as natural and appropriate (Everett, 2002; Lane, 2000). According to Bourdieu, these actions upon the self constitute *symbolic violence*, and make the domination under which they suffer more difficult than ever to challenge:

There are many things people accept without knowing. In fact, I think that in terms of symbolic domination, resistance is more difficult, since it is something you absorb like air, something you don't feel pressured by; it is everywhere and nowhere, and to escape from that is very difficult ... With the mechanism of symbolic violence, domination tends to take the form of a more effective, and in this sense more brutal, means of oppression. (Bourdieu in Eagleton, 1992, pp. 114-115)

Reflexivity

In an interesting departure from most philosophers, Bourdieu included social scientists within the framework of his theories through a conceptualization of *reflexivity*. Bourdieu's concept of *reflexivity* rests on the idea that it is impossible for the social scientist to be fully objective because he is an individual who exists within various *fields* in society, holds certain forms of *capital*, and whose *habitus* includes certain *doxic* notions (Bourdieu, 1980/1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Thus, *reflexivity* refers to the need for the social scientist to continually “turn the instruments of social science back” upon himself in order to reduce distortions that may be introduced by the scientist's personal experience (Wacquant, 2008, p. 273):

What distresses me when I read some works by sociologists is that people whose

profession it is to objectivize the social world prove so rarely able to objectivize themselves, and fail so often to realize that what their apparently scientific discourse talks about is not the object, but their relation to the object. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 68-69)

Bourdieu also argued against intellectuals assuming the point of view of the “impartial spectator.” Instead, he suggested that by assuming such a point of view the social scientist is not only unaware of the influence of his own personal *habitus* and *field*, but also “(mis)construes the social world as an interpretive puzzle to be resolved, rather than a mesh of practical tasks to be accomplished in real time and space” (Wacquant, 2008, p. 273). In a way, Bourdieu argued that by portraying the world in purely objective terms (as “things” to be studied), the social scientist does not provide insight into its inner workings, but instead perpetuates the obfuscations that already exist (*habitus* within individuals; *doxa* within *fields*). It is by this process that Bourdieu warned that intellectuals become the “toys of social forces” who contribute to the maintenance of the status quo (Bourdieu, 1984/1988; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Everett, 2002; Stabile & Morooka, 2003).

Bourdieu (1998) argued that social scientists should guard against this possibility by remaining vigilant to their own biases, but also by aligning themselves with the individuals they study. Specifically, Bourdieu argued that it is imperative that social scientists “devote some of their time and energy, in their activist mode,” to help “non-professionals to equip themselves with specific weapons of resistance” (p. 57). Within this idea is Bourdieu’s belief that intellectuals have a civic mission to “intervene in the public sphere on matters for which [they have] competency,” and to use the cultural, social, and intellectual *capital* that accompanies the position of the intellectual to expose the inequalities inherent in society, and the methods by which they are perpetuated (Wacquant, 2008, p. 275). Bourdieu believed that this mission was essential, and in *Weight of the World* (1993/2000), he organized the research of more than twenty

sociologists to demonstrate how such a process could be conducted. Specifically, Bourdieu and his colleagues produced detailed ethnographies exploring in great depth the experiences of individual suffering throughout the world. In summarizing this process, Bourdieu explained that by speaking with and relating to their subjects, he and the other researchers were able to transcend the intellectual *doxa* that had previously defined their experience, illuminating the real social problems that contributed to their misery, and countering the *symbolic violence* built into their experiences. For scientists interested in uncovering the truth, Bourdieu believed that such a role was not only beneficial, but was necessary to conducting meaningful social science.

Chapter 2: Common Critiques of Bourdieu's Theories

Commentaries and criticisms of Bourdieu abound in the literature and are far ranging – from the difficulty of Bourdieu's writing style (Garrett, 2007b; Jenkins, 1992) to critiques of Bourdieu's depiction of culture (Lamont, 2010). Given the space and scope of this paper, the author cannot hope to cover all of the ground generated by Bourdieu's critics. Instead, this chapter will cover the most commonly cited critiques, and those most relevant to the purpose of this paper. Specifically, this chapter will describe the criticism that Bourdieu's work is elitist and deterministic, particularly in terms of free will within oppressed populations. In addition, this chapter will further explore the characteristic of *reflexivity* and the criticism that, according to Bourdieu, possession of this trait was exclusive to sociologists. Following from these critiques is the argument that Bourdieu's theories pigeonhole individuals as "victims" or "perpetrators," which in turn, negates their participation in their own liberation or their capacity to pursue meaningful personal change. Relatedly, Bourdieu has been criticized for boiling all human behavior down to pre-reflective strategic maneuvers, downplaying the role of individual consciousness, emotion, morality, and concern for others. Finally, this chapter will examine Bourdieu's call for social scientists to oppose political, economic, and social inequalities, focusing on the contradictions between his formulation of the concept of *fields* and his later writings on neoliberalism.

Elitism and Determinism

The most common criticism of Bourdieu's work is that there is an implied social determinism to his theories. According to critical authors, Bourdieu's theoretical description of *habitus* paints a picture where individual actors have little free will, particularly those within dominated groups (Cronin, 1996; Everett, 2002; Garrett, 2007b; Jenkins, 1992; Lane, 2000;

Sewell, 1992). Some of these authors note that while Bourdieu describes adequately the way that social conditions affect everything from individuals' dispositions to actions, he fails to paint a picture of the individual actor within the *habitus*, and thus fails to describe the mechanism by which the *habitus* can change and adapt to new circumstances. According to Crossley (2001), "Bourdieu allows the concept of the habitus, for the most part, to pre-empt his conception of agency ... Indeed, sometimes he substitutes the habitus for the agent" (p. 94).

According to Bourdieu's theory, through a process of expectation, an individual's *habitus* uses past experiences to give form and coherence to new experiences. There are occasions however, created by unique social situations ("periods of crisis"), where the expectations generated by a person's *habitus* are out of sync with reality. In these cases, Bourdieu allowed, objective conditions call into question the individual's *doxic* notions, and allow the *habitus* to learn and adapt (Bourdieu, 1972/1977). Bourdieu also offered that during these periods, there is an opportunity for the individual to engage in critical reflection and debate about previously unquestioned assumptions. However, as Crossley (2001) and Fram (2004) point out, without a conceptualization of the agent over and above the notion of *habitus*, it is impossible to understand how the individual or "creature of habit" engages in such reflection and debate:

It is because Bourdieu ignores [the] generative role of agency, in my view, that he leaves himself vulnerable to the charge of determinism. Without a more elaborate conception of the agent whose actions generate habits, it is impossible for him to explain how habits are generated, modified, or indeed fitted to the exigencies of material life circumstances. He is left appearing to suggest, for example, that conditions of material scarcity produce habits of this or that kind automatically, where a stronger focus upon generative agency would bridge the gap between habits and their material conditions of existence, allowing him to say that 'these habits' emerge in 'these conditions' as a result of the creative and adaptive work of 'this' particular set of agents. (Crossley, 2001, p. 96)

Indeed, within Bourdieu's theories, it appears that social circumstances create the expectations that determine the *habitus*, and social circumstances also create the "periods of crisis" that

modify the *habitus*. While Bourdieu and his protégés argue that during the “periods of crisis,” individuals’ *habitus* have the opportunity to improvise, without a description of individual agency, it appears that personal autonomy “is situational rather than complete or intrinsic. It is somehow caught up in features of daily life and thus does not quite correspond to the individualism at the heart of American political ideology” (Fram, 2004, p. 558).

Related to the argument that individuals within Bourdieu’s theories lack personal agency is the charge that, particularly in his discussion of dominated populations, his theories are elitist and patronizing. Lane (2000) illustrates this criticism in his depiction of Bourdieu’s paradoxical distinction between the adaptation of the *habitus* and a “*libération prise de conscience*” (“liberation consciousness”). In Bourdieu’s discussions of sexist social norms, he argues that emancipation of women cannot flow from “liberation consciousness,” but can only follow a transformation of the social conditions that cause gender roles and domination to be seemingly natural. However, as Lane documents, Bourdieu does not explain how such a transformation might be achieved or who might work for such a transformation without first becoming conscious of the arbitrary and unjust nature of domination in the first place. Similarly, Bourdieu argues that Algerian peasantry were incapable of revolutionary action because they did not possess the material and cultural resources to conceive of such action. However, as noted by Lane (2000):

If ‘traditional’ Algerian society were indeed as static as Bourdieu suggested, as inherently resistant to initiative or innovation, it was difficult to see how he could account for the emergence of an indigenous liberation movement which was to prove powerful enough to provoke the downfall of a French Republic and the end of the French colonial presence in Algeria. (p. 16)

Lane (2000) argues that Bourdieu’s elitism is due largely to the “synthetic distinction” he makes “between the scientific knowledge of the sociologist and the doxic, pre-reflexive or purely

practical knowledge which [he] attributes to ‘ordinary’ individuals in their everyday behavior” (Lane, 2000, p. 197). In a similar criticism, Latour (1996) argues that Bourdieu is guilty of using the arrogant “metalanguage” characteristic of “classical sociologists” in which sociologists portend to know more than their subjects, “seeing right through them to the social structure or the destiny of which they are fated” (p. 199). Furthermore, classical sociologists believe themselves able to penetrate reality and see what really goes on, even when this is different from what their subjects think (Schinkel, 2007).

Bourdieu’s conceptualization of *reflexivity* makes him vulnerable to such charges. According to Bourdieu, *reflexivity* can be understood as the “systematic exploration of the unthought categories of thought which delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 40). This process is best understood as collective and academic, rather than individual, and it is largely specific to those *fields* that have institutionalized expertise in this skill (Schirato & Webb, 2003, p. 551). In short, Bourdieu believed that the capacity for *reflexivity* was unique to social scientists in general and sociologists in particular. Why, despite evidence that they were similar, did Bourdieu make a distinction between *reflexivity* and “*liberatie prise de conscience*”? Furthermore, why did Bourdieu exclude individual actors from being capable of *reflexivity*? As will be demonstrated in Chapter 3, Bourdieu felt that sociologists were relatively autonomous and not subject to over-determination by the fields of power, politics, or business (Schirato & Webb, 2003). Furthermore, Bourdieu believed that the accumulation of *capital* within the scientific field was predicated (through a process of peer review) on the practice of interrogating claims to truth and objectivity (individually and within the *field*). Within Bourdieu’s view, the *autonomy* of the sociological field and its institutionalized practice of “turning the instruments of science” on

itself (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 214) made it uniquely able to use *reflexivity* and derive the true conditions underlying the objects of its study.

Personal Action and Responsibility

Following from the challenge that Bourdieu's theories are largely deterministic is the charge that there is little room for individual empowerment within his theoretical framework. Indeed, Bourdieu often seems to reduce people to either "victims" or "perpetrators" (Schinkel, 2003). Furthermore, in his book *Acts of Resistance* (1998), Bourdieu argues that a protest movement of the oppressed would amount to a "social miracle" without the guidance of sociologists:

Although most emancipatory movements do not find their origin in sociology, to Bourdieu it was a 'miracle' for one to appear without its guidance. This was based on the sociological theory according to which certain deprived groups do not have the means to come to organized protest. (Schinkel, 2003, p. 86)

Although he took great pains to distinguish himself from structuralists (Lane, 2000), it appears that Bourdieu inadvertently fell victim to a criticism commonly held against structuralism; namely, that this approach fails to see actors as capable of participation in the processes of personal and social change and leaves little space for the appreciation of human agency, creativity, and the capacity for giving meaning to experience (Finn & Jacobson, 2003).

Bourdieu's theories have also been criticized for boiling down individual actions and decisions solely to strategic moves within *fields*. According to Bourdieu, not only do individuals act according to the learned dispositions contained within their *habitus*, but they also act in ways that are meant to maximize their personal *capital* within the *fields* where they are located. According to Sayer (2010), this conceptualization negates the ethical dimension of human behavior, neglects the role of emotions in human processes, and disregards the connections between behavior and moral concern for the wellbeing of others. Furthermore, Sayer argues that

while Bourdieu may occasionally acknowledge conscious reasoning in individuals, he often follows by discounting this reasoning or “reducing it to strategic calculation” (p. 88). As aptly described by Sayer, to ignore the social considerations and personal reasoning at the heart of human behavior is to produce a “bland, alienated account of social life” (p. 87). Furthermore, such an account seems largely out of step with reality. While it may be true that human behavior can be conditioned in certain ways by historical experiences involving *fields* and *capital* and the way those experiences are *embodied* within the *habitus*, attributing *all* human behavior to this conditioning goes too far. Indeed, as suggested by Crossley (2001), “[i]t is not habits that act, after all, but rather agents” (p. 95).

Contradictory Presentation of *Neoliberalism*

In *Acts of Resistance* (1998), Bourdieu wrote that his purpose was to “provide useful weapons to all those who are striving to resist the scourge of neoliberalism” (p. vii). He made many references to the “object” of neoliberalism, referring to “it” as a weapon (p. 34), attributing to “it” characteristics (“very smart and very modern,” p. 34), and describing “its” actions (“appeals to progress,” “tries to write off progressive thought and action as archaic,” p. 35). Guided by this analysis, Garrett (2007a) argues that “neoliberalism bites into practice in social work” and urges social workers to resist its progress (p. 240). What is evident in these depictions is that despite his theoretical conceptualization of *fields* as a series of situations, relationships, and struggles over *capital*, Bourdieu describes neoliberalism as a single object or condition that must be resisted.

Given that *Acts of Resistance* was written as a call to action and “weapon” for “critical intellectuals” and not a theoretical text, Bourdieu’s rhetorical depiction of neoliberalism as a single, objective foe *does* seem at first to be a logical choice. The most powerful achievement of

this rhetoric is that it allows Bourdieu to describe the “features” and “actions” of neoliberalism, particularly the ways that positive *doxic* notions about unregulated markets were becoming increasingly incorporated into the *habitus* of individuals throughout the world. In this way, Bourdieu’s description of neoliberalism is useful in providing a *heterodoxy*, or counterpoint, to the prevailing arguments. As described by Schinkel (2003), Bourdieu believed that sociology “uses its knowledge of social laws to challenge them effectively” (p. 70). As such, Bourdieu was attempting to provide knowledge of the ways that neoliberalism was being introduced throughout the world in order to encourage questioning and opposition to such presentations.

However, Bourdieu’s description of neoliberalism in *Acts of Resistance* is also notable for the information that it does not provide. Having presented neoliberalism as a single “object” to be resisted, there is no qualitative description of what “it” is, where in space and time “it” is located, and how “it” can be resisted (apart from seeing through “its” ruse). While useful in creating a common enemy among critical intellectuals, Bourdieu’s depiction of neoliberalism does *not* allow this conceptualization to benefit from a robust description that could have resulted had Bourdieu made use of his theories on *capital* and *fields*. While Bourdieu does occasionally call upon specific examples (Loic Waquant’s description of the retrenchment of the welfare state and correlated growth in the penal state in the U.S., for example), he does not make it clear that neoliberalism is not a single thing to be battled but a series of struggles over *capital*, taking place in a number of *fields* and *sub-fields* – locally, nationally, and internationally. Furthermore, by failing to provide a more thorough description of neoliberalism, Bourdieu also fails to make it clear that these battles are fought on more than a semantic level, and that they involve real resources, often essential to the wellbeing of the poor. Finally, by describing the “battle” with neoliberalism in terms of *doxa* and *heterodoxa*, Bourdieu relegates this fight to the academic

field, failing to rally individuals to actual sites of struggle. As such, this final criticism of Bourdieu's work is similar to other criticisms insofar as it reflects the elitism and overly theoretical nature of Bourdieu's depiction of social inequalities while overlooking the role of individuals in social struggles.

Chapter 3: Relevance to Social Work

Having explored Bourdieu's theoretical contributions and their critiques, it is useful to explore how these concepts can be applied to social work. Specifically, this chapter will use Bourdieu's conceptual terms to analyze social work's position within the bureaucratic *field* and demonstrate how a preoccupation with status has caused social work to relinquish some of the autonomy Bourdieu theorized is necessary for the *field* to practice within its own values and norms. This chapter will also explore the concepts of *habitus*, power, and *symbolic violence*, particularly as they play out in the relationships between social workers and their clients. This section is helpful in elucidating the ways that worker interactions with clients may impede client progress, and carries a warning for social workers about the way that their own *habitus* can slowly become oriented towards power and control. This chapter will then turn to an application of Bourdieu's conception of *reflexivity*, demonstrating the way that self-scrutiny can help social workers remain sensitive to the ways that their interactions contribute to clients' experiences of subordination. Following from this is an exploration of Bourdieusian *relational analysis*, a methodology applied by Bourdieu and colleagues while doing research for *The Weight of the World*, where the sociologists became intimately familiar with their subjects. This section offers a counterpoint to the commonly held belief that social workers must maintain a professional distance from their clients in order to remain objective. Concluding this chapter is a discussion of the ways that Bourdieu's theories call for social workers to critically engage with the sociopolitical order shaping their clients' reality, and to invest their cultural, social, and intellectual *capital* to oppose inequalities.

Social Work's Position Within the Bureaucratic Field

Bourdieu's contention that *fields* occur in hierarchies directly applies to the *field* of social

work, particularly its history of fighting for status as a respected profession. Since Abraham Flexner (1915) stated that social work was a non-profession, the field has been preoccupied with its status, working continuously to demonstrate its legitimacy as a profession commensurate with the medical or legal fields. According to Morris (2008), these efforts by social workers to prove the field's status have resulted in some significant advancements, but have also come at a price. While social work has developed many of the attributes of professionalization – a systematic body of knowledge, a curriculum centered around a standardized and teachable practice method, the development of professional associations, and training at the university level, some authors have argued that social work has left behind the tradition of social reform and replaced “its humanistic foundations with scientific positivism” (p. 30). According to Reid & Edwards (2006), social work has turned increasingly towards a model where clinical expertise and evidence-based practice are favored and services are no longer provided by social workers themselves, but are contracted through nonprofit and for-profit agencies. In a fervent critique, Reamer (1993) argues that due to professionalization, the field of social work attracts fewer people drawn to a commitment to social justice and public welfare. This view is shared by Ferguson (2008), who argues that social work's turn toward managerialism has resulted in a desertion of its original mission to promote social justice and to provide aid and comfort to the vulnerable, oppressed, and impoverished.

In their article reviewing social work fields in ten countries, Weiss-Gal & Welbourne (2008) distinguish between two approaches for determining professionalization: the attributes (or trait) approach and the power (or control) approach. As outlined above, the successes that have been made in distinguishing American social work as a profession fall under the attributes approach. Despite these successes, and whatever costs have been associated with them, a

number of authors have argued that social work continues to fall short of professional status, particularly because it lacks autonomy; the ability to make decisions on the basis of its own professional knowledge and values, free of the restraints of managers or agencies outside the profession (Hugman, 1996). In Bourdieusian terms, the *field* of social work lies under the control of the state which itself is not a single monolithic entity, but a collection of *sub-fields* “vying over the definition and distribution of public goods” (Waquant, 2010). Within this collective, social work represents the “left hand of the state” – the “feminine” “spendthrift,” in charge of “social functions” such as education, health, housing, welfare, and offering protection and relief to the poor. In contrast, the “right hand” or “masculine” side of the state is oriented toward economic discipline and law and order (Bourdieu, 1998; Bourdieu & Waquant, 1994).

The significance of this conceptualization of social work is twofold. First, because the *field* is viewed as feminine-gendered, it is not on par with other *sub-fields* in terms of *symbolic capital*. In fact, some theorists (Hearn, 1982; Kadushin, 1976) have argued that it is because the *field* is characterized by the seemingly natural and feminine qualities of listening and caring that it is considered by some to be a semi-profession. Added to these difficulties are doubts about social work’s knowledge base:

Although increasingly accepted as rigorous, the social sciences continue to have a more ambiguous standing in political or popular consciousness compared to the natural science base of medicine, or the ancient traditions of the law. Social scientists may find themselves caught between their work being accepted, and so seen as merely common sense (what people knew anyway), and not being accepted because it challenges preconceptions. (Hugman, 1996, pp. 133-134)

Thus, as a *sub-field* vying for the resources of the state, social work has more to do to gain and maintain its legitimacy – it must fight for *capital*, and cling desperately to it. Furthermore, the *sub-field* is at pains to assert its “masculinity” – to prove (often through means-testing and other “tough-love” interventions) that it is a sensible and responsible trustee of the state’s resources.

A second implication of Bourdieu's conceptualization of social work is that within this framework, the *field* is not autonomous. According to Bourdieu (1980/1990, 1990), an autonomous field possesses its own history, operates according to its own *habitus*, and upholds a distinctive set of beliefs. As the mere inverse of the "right hand" of the state, social work does not have such sovereignty. As demonstrated in Waquant's (2010) description of the retrenchment of the welfare state and the correlated growth in the penal state over the last two decades, within this dichotomy, when one "hand" benefits, the other loses. Furthermore, as the feminine-associated "spendthrift" member of this duo, there is a *doxic* notion that social work should be placed under the guidance of "disciplined" managers, focused on efficiency and evidence, distancing the *field* even further from self-determination in line with its values of compassion and charity.

The concept of *autonomy* is particularly salient within Bourdieu's theory since he believed it to be crucial for individuals to exercise critical analysis and debate on behalf of the underprivileged. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Bourdieu believed that social scientists have a civic duty to invest their social and intellectual *capital* in political struggles, and to apply critical reasoning to overthrow the *doxa* which defines the social conditions of the underclass and legitimizes their suffering. While in line with social work values, and advocated for directly in the *NASW Code of Ethics* (1999, Preamble section, para. 1), so long as the social work *field* remains preoccupied with its own legitimacy as a profession, and seeks to establish its validity by imitating the punitive and stingy methods of the bureaucratic *field's* "right hand," social work will be crippled in its ability to advocate for social justice and provide relief to the poor.

Power and Symbolic Violence

Bourdieu's theoretical tools are also useful in highlighting the power relations and *symbolic violence* built into the interactions between workers and clients. In a fitting application of Bourdieu's theories to the practice of providing aid and services to clients, Pellion (1998) describes the impact of means testing on the relationship between client and worker:

... officials police access to social benefits, ensuring that only those with a legitimate entitlement receive them. They operate in a field with political capital, and the exercise of their power immediately produces stigma, negative symbolic capital for their clients. (p. 223)

Aiming to minimize this stigma and to recoup their positive *symbolic capital*, Pellion demonstrates that clients employ a number of strategies, from resistance to submission, inducing a response from workers charged with maintaining compliance. This relationship carries consequences for the *habitus* of both recipients and workers: clients identify themselves as "objects" of welfare, powerless and dependent; workers develop an administrative *habitus* that is oriented towards power and control. The net effect is that

[w]elfare agencies and welfare clients belong to a structure of domination, but one which is largely misrecognized. Bourdieu's notion of 'misrecognition' simply indicates, in this context, that the relationship between administrative agencies and welfare recipients, which is organized in terms of control, is misrecognized as caring. Misrecognition is of course not accidental: it activates symbolic structures which are incorporated in the *habitus* and are likely to ensure compliance. (p. 221)

Bourdieu (1979/1980) writes that the importance of *symbolic power* is in its ability to impose the principles of reality construction on others. As trusted members of society who encounter individuals when they are most vulnerable, and then define this experience through written assessments and case plans, it is incumbent upon social workers to consider the effects of social inequalities on their clients *habitus*, the ways in which clients may have *embodied* their dominated social position, the attendant shame and blame of that subjected position (*symbolic*

violence), and the potential of their own actions in reinforcing their clients' underclass status.

Approaches which attempt to improve client functioning through threats, punitive practices, and shaming may not only miss the mark, but may also do harm.

Reflexivity and Self-Scrutiny

To adequately understand the impact of their involvement in the life-experiences of clients, and to guard against impeding clients' progress or adding to their suffering, social workers must evaluate the assumptions under which they operate. According to Houston (2002):

Social workers [must] analyze their taken for granted views ... before they intervene in clients' lives. 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. (p. 159)

This awareness is gained through *reflexivity*, or the process by which social workers reflect on how the assumptions underlying their practice have been mediated through their personal *habitus* and *field* as well as that of their profession (Bourdieu, 1984/1988). To do this, Bourdieu suggested that individuals reflect on the ways that their personal values, attitudes, and perceptions allow certain questions and ideas but exclude others. To the point, are workers trained to see individuals seeking help in terms of deficiencies? Are they inclined to judge clients as drains upon society ("takers") rather than in terms of socio-economic failures? Finally, to what extent is client resistance written off as evidence that they are undeserving, rather than an indication that the worker has not found a satisfactory fit between their analyses and the needs identified by clients (White, 1997)?

The importance of asking these questions lies in the fact that the information and analyses arrived at by social workers occurs through an interpretive process, with tremendous consequences for their clients. As part of their work, social workers make judgments and put

together arguments justifying their assessments. Importantly, however, “these judgments do not rely on formal knowledge alone, but on a range of other rationalities and warrants ... judgments about blameworthiness and creditworthiness, responsibility and irresponsibility” (Taylor & White, 2001, p. 47). Thus, the assessments and recommendations made by social workers are not simply the accumulation of objective knowledge, but a process of interpreting information:

The process of engaging with others develops, recreates, challenges, negotiates, and affirms meaning. Therefore, the search for meaning requires reflexivity, a process of self-reference and examination. (Finn & Jacobson, 2003, p. 70)

In a critique of contemporary social work techniques, Finn & Jacobson (2003) point out that “systems,” “ecosystems,” and “person-in-environment” approaches offer little basis for critical engagement with questions of power. Based on the idea that social workers should help clients adapt to their current conditions, these approaches tend to naturalize arbitrary power differences, and assume – rather than question – the dominant social, political, and economic order. In contrast, structurally-focused social workers start from the assumption that the dominant political and economic order directly contributes to social problems, focusing all of their attention on the transformation of existing structures and ignoring the role of individuals. Both approaches have pitfalls: the systems and ecosystems approaches do not go far enough in addressing the power structures that cause client suffering, and structuralists overemphasize social inequalities while overlooking the capacity of individuals to achieve personal and social change. By engaging in a continual process of *reflexivity* and self-scrutiny, social workers can remain vigilant to the assumptions involved in their practice and balance the strengths and pitfalls of both methods.

Relational Analysis

In *The Weight of the World* (1993/2000), Bourdieu and colleagues demonstrate the

practice of *relational analysis*, a practice developed and employed by the authors where they interacted with subjects on a personal level over prolonged periods, and related to them as individuals who were experts about their own experiences. Describing the approach, Bourdieu identified five strategies for ensuring the truth and thoroughness of interviews: (1) making the project's intentions, goals, and procedural principles explicit; (2) clarifying what subjects can and cannot say; (3) overcoming the limitations of documentation by taking into account body language, vocal stress, or irony; (4) making sure that interviewers had extensive knowledge of the social contexts of their subjects through research and as a result of having a history with the subject; and (5) ensuring through a process of self-reflexivity that interviewers objectified their social and professional contexts, and tried to distance themselves, as far as possible, from preconceived notions and values taken from their *habitus* and *field* (Schirato & Webb, 2003).

Having described an engagement process that employs many of the strategies utilized in standard social work practice, why did Bourdieu distinguish the sociologists at work in *Weight of the World* from social workers, whom he characterized as “agents of the state”? Bourdieu believed that in order to provide true critical analysis of social conditions and to arrive at “truth,” it was essential for the “critical intellectual” to remain autonomous from social conditions which could influence his assessment (Bourdieu, 1980/1990, 1990). Although Bourdieu believed that there were a number of problems with the *field* of sociology during his time (Garrett, 2007a), he also believed that sociologists were particularly capable of this task:

One does not enter sociology without severing all the adherences and adhesions by which one is ordinarily bound to groups, without abjuring the beliefs constitutive of membership and without renouncing all ties of filiation or affiliation. (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 178)

Furthermore, as argued earlier, Bourdieu harbored many doubts about the ability of social workers to remain autonomous and to practice within the context of their own professional values, especially given the broader context of their position within the bureaucratic *field*.

Evident in Bourdieu's *relational analysis* is the idea that social workers must be skeptical of the assumed dichotomy between a worker's professional and personal self. In the *field* of social work, professional objectivity is highly valued as a quality that allows workers to divorce themselves from subjective feelings, attitudes, and beliefs that might negatively influence practice. Rather than attempting to develop a synthesis in which professionals make use of their personal selves in implementing professional functions (Shulman, 1991), workers are encouraged to remain autonomous from the clients they serve. Shulman (1991) suggests that not only is it impossible for a worker to truly repress his personal self, but that it undermines an essential component of the helping process – the interpersonal relationship between the worker and the client:

In addition to being complex, social work practice is also a dynamic and interactional process in which the variables that contribute to the outcomes affect and are affected by each other. For example, the worker's use of particular skills and investment of activity and energy may well depend upon the worker's perception of the clients motivation. In turn, in a manner of influence best described as reciprocal, the client's motivation may increase or decrease as he or she senses the worker's level of investment. (p. 3)

In a similar fashion, Bourdieu argues that social scientists must keep in mind, first and foremost, that they are not investigating “things” but “relations” that are continually changing and up to interpretation (Bourdieu in Bourdieu et al., 2000, p. 609). Furthermore, Bourdieu argues that *relational analysis* involves “active and methodical listening” as opposed to “half-understanding” based on a “distracted and routinized attention” (p. 614). Bourdieu suggests that through this process, social scientist may “avoid the condescension and insensitivity characteristic of other interview situations,” which does little more than offer a “projection of

doxic belief’ (Stabile & Morooka, 2003). Bourdieu believed that through the process of *relational analysis*, a social scientist could be effective in suspending, if not completely transcending, commonly held beliefs (*doxa*) that serve to perpetuate the *symbolic violence* experienced by subjects (Stabile & Morooka, 2003). As such, Bourdieu believed that while *relational analysis* may at first seem subjective, when paired with *reflexivity*, it could in fact become a more effective means of arriving at truth.

Addressing Inequality

In addition to highlighting the ways that social workers should examine themselves, their field, and their relationships with clients, Bourdieu’s theories also call for social workers to critically engage with the sociopolitical order shaping their clients’ reality, and to invest their cultural, social, and intellectual *capital* to oppose inequalities. According to Fram (2004), Bourdieu’s formulation of *habitus*, which is defined in terms of an individual’s position within society, and the self-worth he derives from his position, requires that social workers consider *structural* barriers when considering the attitudes and behaviors of clients. Furthermore, due to the interrelationship of poverty, individual wellbeing, and behavior, Bourdieu’s theoretical framework also makes it clear that social work with clients must involve efforts to diminish the effects of poverty, both material and *embodied*, in order to achieve meaningful change.

Citing Bourdieu and Waquant’s (in Bourdieu et al., 2000) depiction of American ghettos, often characterized by an absence of police, schools, health care institutions, and social service organizations, Garret (2007a) argues that social workers must also resist the push of neoliberalism and the retreat of the state in providing a social safety net for the poor. As Pileggi and Patton (2003) maintain, when working in a neoliberal context, “practitioners of a *field* become liable to two masters: the practices and norms of [their] discipline and the practices and

norms of the market” (p. 318). In line with this, social workers must resist efforts to make social work more managerial and market-focused (Garrett, 2007a, 2007b), and to use social work as a means of controlling the poor (Bourdieu in Bourdieu et al., 2000). As such, Bourdieu’s theories encourage social workers to employ a multi-level approach, addressing not only individual factors but also the effect of structural forces on client circumstances.

As illustrated by Reisch and Andrews (2002), the field of social work has a long tradition of structural activism spanning from the settlement houses in the early 20th century, through the Rank and File Movement of the 1930s, and culminating in the Radical Social Work Movement of the 1970s. These campaigns, headed primarily by social workers, were characterized not only by the direct help provided to clients, but also by their affiliations with trade unions, feminism, pacifism, and labor activism (including boycotts and picket lines). In addition, The Rank and File and Radical Social Work movements both challenged the professionalization of social work, believing that it undermined the relationship between social workers and clients. Instead, these movements encouraged the development of closer relationships between social workers and clients, based on common class interests (Ferguson, 2008). Despite this tradition, Ferguson (2008) and others (Garrett 2007a, 2007b; Waquant, 2010) argue that social work has become increasingly conservative, characterized by:

... policies that insist that the primary role of social workers is to ‘manage’ ‘high-risk’ families or individuals, to ration increasingly meager services, and to collude in the demonization of groups such as young people and asylum seekers. (Ferguson, 2008, p. 4)

In his book, *Reclaiming Social Work*, Ferguson (2008) also makes the point that recent trends toward managerialism have left many social workers alienated, despondent, and estranged from the profession. If social work is to reclaim its identity as a compassionate profession, committed to and aligned with the interests of the underclass, it is necessary for it to return to its

progressive roots and challenge the social structures that undermine social justice. According to Ferguson, this is a direction that is not only necessary for the well-being of social work clients, but also for social workers to be happy and fulfilled in their work.

Epilogue: Unanswered Questions & Final Thoughts

Bourdieu's theories reflect a number of themes which were present in his childhood, early adulthood, and while as a member of France's intellectual elite. Topics such as class inequalities, the *embodiment* of difference, and the insight provided by education are all present in his writings, and impart a personal intimacy to his work. In a similar tradition of bringing the self into theory, I finish this paper with a series of questions which Bourdieu leaves unanswered for me as a scholar interested in individual-level social work. These questions are related to the critiques enumerated in Chapter 2, namely that Bourdieu's theories are elitist and deterministic, and overlook the role of the individual. In this final section, I briefly revisit these critiques, focusing specifically on their application to social work. Following this is a discussion of how social workers can internalize and apply Bourdieu's theories, and not get stalled by the difficulties.

Unanswered Questions

In Jeremy Lane's (2000) text, *Pierre Bourdieu: A Critical Introduction*, the author makes a salient point that Bourdieu's theories are elitist and deterministic, and that they insinuate that oppressed individuals do not have the proper *reflexivity* to liberate themselves. To what degree then, is it possible that by adopting Bourdieu's theoretical framework, social workers also introduce elitism and determinism into the *habitus* of their clients? If, as Bourdieu's theories postulate, *reflexivity* is exclusive to social scientists and sociologists, or barring that, those with the social and economic means to engage in such a practice, how do such claims feed into clients' feelings of hopelessness, dependency, or the notion that they are "objects" of welfare? Furthermore, where is there room within Bourdieu's theories for empowerment? A theory that focuses solely on the distinction between "victims" and "perpetrators," and which claims that a

protest movement amongst the oppressed would be a “social miracle” does not hold much hope for self-liberation.

While some social workers engage in community and macro-level social work, most engage one-on-one with clients, and within a limited span of time. A number of authors (Emirbayer & Williams, 2005; Emond, 2003; Horvat & Davis, 2011; Houston, 2002; Kita, 2011) have argued that Bourdieu’s theories can be used to inform social work with individuals. However, Bourdieu’s theories largely negate the ability of individuals to change their *habitus* outside of structural change, or with any immediacy:

... such transformations, as any number of sociological studies suggest, do not happen ‘spontaneously.’ They must be prepared within the social formation over time, events building upon events and opening up spaces of opportunity. This is only possible, however, if the events of the present do not pass away into nothing but rather cumulate and sediment; if the actions of today have a durable impact upon the actions of tomorrow. (Crossley, 2001, p. 116)

Within this context, are Bourdieu’s theories useful in helping clients find meaningful change in their personal lives on a day-to-day basis without bringing change to the larger social context? Also, if Bourdieu’s theories offer no place for liberation consciousness (Lane, 2000) or agency (Fram, 2004; Schinkel, 2007), how can social workers engage with clients to solve individual-level problems? Especially considering the limitation of time, how do social workers help clients change their personal circumstances in the absence of structural change? Furthermore, what does it mean for social workers to advocate for structural change? Must all social workers fight the “scourge of neoliberalism” or are smaller battles also meaningful?

Finally, as pointed out by Sayer (2010), Bourdieu’s theories do not leave room for social workers to engage with clients in terms of morality, responsibility, or concern for others. What does this mean for social workers that work with clients who have hurt others? Is there room within a Bourdieusian framework to approach clients in terms of personal responsibility,

restorative justice, and compassion for those who have been hurt? Within the context of strategic moves within *fields*, how do social workers assist clients in setting things right?

Final Thoughts and Ways Forward

However elitist and deterministic Bourdieu's theoretical formulation of *habitus* and *reflexivity* may be, implementation of these theories in practice need not share the same traits. In an interpretation of Bourdieu's theories for social work, Houston (2002) suggests a way to implement a Bourdieusian framework within individual-level social work:

... 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. Conscientization might also be fostered through helping clients to analyze the formative fields in their lives. There are a number of critical questions fueling 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? (Houston, 2002, p. 162)

In this description, Houston applies Bourdieu's theories to formulate a model that can be used in direct work with clients. If effective, this model may supplement the person-in-environment approach, offering social workers a framework for addressing individual-level client problems while assisting them in identifying controlling power differentials and structural barriers that impede their progress (Finn & Jacobson, 2003).

Bourdieu's theories also call upon the critical intellectual to directly engage in structural change and to oppose inequalities. For some, however, a command toward structural activism may be overwhelming. Are all social workers responsible for macro-level social work? What about clients? How do they fit within this macro-level activity? Despite his rhetorical focus on neoliberalism in *Acts of Resistance* (1998), Bourdieu's writings also demonstrate that he saw the value of small battles oriented toward larger social goals. In one example, Bourdieu describes

efforts by French welfare ministries to protect social housing policy:

For example, within the French bureaucracy, when housing finance was being reformed, the welfare ministries fought against the financial ministries to defend the social housing policy. Those civil servants had an interest in defending their ministries and their positions; but they also believed in what they were doing, they were defending their convictions. (Bourdieu, 1998, p.33)

In a similar way, social workers can engage in a number of every-day actions that are beneficial to the lives of their clients. Most importantly, social workers must use *reflexivity* to examine and resist the tendency within themselves and their offices to blame clients for their situations, focus on weakness, or exert domination and control. In addition, within the *fields* in which their clients live, social workers must use their expertise, training, and *social capital* to advocate for the provision of concrete resources necessary to the lives of their clients. To this end, social workers must push their agencies to be less punitive and stingy in allocating food, money and other assets to clients, and should work with clients to mobilize and access services within their community. Above that, social workers must fight efforts within their agencies to retract social services or to implement miserly means-testing procedures that humiliate and discourage:

... ‘The world is not a commodity!’ reflects the widespread feeling amongst many social workers that their practice should be driven by values of respect and social justice, rather than budgetary considerations. (Ferguson, 2008, p. 4)

Finally, social workers should use their trade unions (Service Employees International Union [SEIU], for example) and professional organizations (National Association of Social Workers [NASW]) to continually advocate on behalf of social work clients. During the Occupy Wall Street Movement of 2011, both SEIU and the NASW were galvanized in the national effort to protest cuts to essential social services among the poor and middle class. While inspiring at the time, efforts among conservatives to curtail services began before the Occupy Movement, and continued even after that movement - and SEIU and NASW activism within it - stalled. As

such, social workers must push their representatives to remain vigilant and vocal on behalf of clients, even without a national movement to inspire them. At present, the United States Congress is debating cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, otherwise known as food stamps (Stolberg, 2013). On this issue and others like it, clients depend on the social *capital*, support, and activism of social workers to prevent retrenchment and maintain a basic standard of living for the poor. To this end, social workers must use their unions and national organizations to lobby Congress and to speak within governmental institutions on behalf of the poor. To the extent that representatives of the social work community are not doing this, it is the responsibility of every social worker to spur their affiliations to these causes.

As illustrated, there are a number of instances where social workers can remain relevant, advocate directly for the well being of their clients, and achieve some satisfaction and autonomy in acting within their own values, even without overt radical activity. While clients may not directly benefit from a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, they *are* affected when their social security benefits are cut, their unemployment insurance is insufficient, or when food security, childcare programs, homeless shelters or other social programs are eliminated. While smaller, comparatively, to the fight against neoliberalism, they are nevertheless salient in people's day-to-day lives. As advocates for clients in these contexts, social workers fulfill their duty to fight the effects of inequality and act as agents of social change.

Conclusion

While at times problematic, Bourdieu's theories have value for social work. As argued by Lane (2000), Bourdieu's most important theoretical contribution is the connection he built between structuralism and existentialism through the conceptual use of *habitus*. This is also Bourdieu's most important contribution to social work. By illuminating the way that inequalities

influence the self-perception (via *symbolic violence*), attitudes and behaviors of clients, Bourdieu signals to social workers that their work on behalf of clients must attend to inequality and structural barriers. In addition, as demonstrated by Pellion (1998), social workers must also be cognizant of their own *habitus*, using *reflexivity* to remain fair and earnest advocates for their clients. By applying these salient principals, social workers can become more effective and meaningful in their practice, but also more connected, fulfilled, and relevant.

Glossary of Terms

Autonomy: Originally theorized by Emmanuel Kant, the capacity of an agent to act in accordance with objective morality rather than under the influence of desires. Bourdieu expands this concept to fields signifying the freedom and ability of individuals within a field to act according to the practices and norms of their discipline rather than market influences.

Capital: Any resource in a given social arena (field) that enables an individual to benefit from participation within the field. Capital comes in three major forms: economic, cultural, and social.

Critical intellectual: Members of the intellectual field who are critical of the intellectual doxa that perpetuates structural and economic inequalities. The critical intellectual is first and foremost responsible for providing a counter-point to journalists and essayists who provide support for neo-liberalism, but also for maintaining the autonomy of the literature, art, and science fields against market forces.

Doxa: A term originally conceptualized by Edmund Husserl used to describe a practical sense of what does or does not constitute a real possibility within greater society.

Embodiment: A term originally defined by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu's use of the term signifies the internalization of the individual's experiences in the forms of likes, dislikes, and personal dispositions, and externalization in the forms of posture, bearing, demeanor, accent, and aesthetic preferences.

Existentialism: Most notably illustrated by Jean-Paul Sartre, a theoretical examination of humanity that focuses on the first-hand experiences of humans and their interactions with the outside world.

Field: The arenas, networks, and social spaces where individuals exist and which in part, define the individual.

Habitus: The unconscious schemata, acquired through perpetual exposure to social conditioning, through which we perceive, judge, and act in the world.

Heterodoxy: A theoretical counterpoint to prevailing preconceived notions about what does or does not constitute a real possibility within greater society (*doxa*).

Neo-liberalism: A form of economics that emphasizes the self-regulative power of the market without governmental interference.

Phenomenology: A theoretical school that focuses on the study of consciousness and the objects of direct experience.

Reflexivity: The act of examining the self, particularly in terms of fields and capital. For social scientists, reflexivity refers to the scientist “turning the instruments of social science” back upon himself in order to reduce distortions in his description of reality.

Relational Analysis: Social science that maintains the premise that scientists are not researching “things” but “relations”.

Schemata: A term coined by Jean Piaget describing the mental structures by which individuals’ thoughts are organized.

Symbolic Capital/Power: A trait of favorability, held by any of the three primary forms of capital, when they are recognized as legitimate.

Symbolic Violence: A condition that exists when *doxa* produces or sustains an unequal distribution of capital.

Structuralism: A theoretical school of thought that describes the world in terms of the interrelatedness of the individual and overarching structures.

References

- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. (R. Nice, Trans.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. (Original work published in 1972).
- Bourdieu, P. (1980). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. (R. Nice, Trans.). London, UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul. (Original work published in 1979).
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241–58). New York, NY: Greenwood.
- Bourdieu, P. (1988). *Homo Academicus*. (P. Collier, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Polity Press. (Original work published in 1984).
- Bourdieu, P. (1989). Social space and symbolic power. *Sociological Theory*, 7(1), 14-25.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The Logic of Practice*. (R. Nice, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Polity Press. (Original work published in 1980).
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *In Other Words: Essays Toward a Reflexive Sociology*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1992) *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1996). *The State Nobility*. (L. C. Clough, Trans.). Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. (Original work published in 1989).
- Bourdieu, P. (1998). *Acts of Resistance: Against the New Myths of Our Time*. (R. Nice, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Polity Press. (Original work published in 1998).
- Bourdieu, P. & Accardo, A., Balazas, G., Beaud, S., Bonvin, F., Bourdieu, E., Bourgois, P., Broccolichi, S., Champagne, P., Christin, R., Faguer, J. P., Garcia, S., Lenoir, R., Oeuvarard, F., Pialoux, M., Pinto, L., Podalydes, D., Sayad, A., Soulie, C. & Wacquant, J.

- D. (2000) *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*. (P. P. Ferguson, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Polity Press. (Original work published in 1993).
- Bourdieu, P., & Waquant, L. (1992). *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Waquant, L. (1994). Rethinking the state: On the genesis and structure of the bureaucratic field. *Sociological Theory*, 12(1): 1–18. (Original work published in 1993).
- Bourgois, P. (2001). The power of violence in war and peace: Post-Cold War lessons from El Salvador. *Ethnography*, 2(1), 5-34.
- Bourgois, P., & Schonberg, J. (2009). *Righteous Dopefiend*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Cronin, C. (1996). Bourdieu and Foucault on power and modernity. *Philosophy & Social criticism*, 22(6), 55-85.
- Crossley, N. (2001). The phenomenological habitus and its construction. *Theory and Society*, 30(1), 81-120.
- Eagleton, T., & Bourdieu, P. (1992). Doxa and common life. *New Left Review*, 191, 111-121.
- Emirbayer, M., & Williams, E. M. (2005). Bourdieu and social work. *Social Service Review*, 79(4), 689-724.
- Emond, R. (2003). Putting the care into residential care: The role of young people. *Journal of Social Work*, 3(3), 321-337.
- Everett, J. (2002). Organizational research and the praxeology of Pierre Bourdieu. *Organizational Research Methods*, 5(1), 56-80.
- Fanon, F. (2004). *The Wretched of the Earth*. (R. Philcox, Trans.). New York, NY: Grove Press. (Original work published in 1961).

- Ferguson, I. (2008). *Reclaiming Social Work: Challenging Neo-liberalism and Promoting Social Justice*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- Finn, J. L., & Jacobson, M. (2003). Just practice: Steps toward a new social work paradigm. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 39(1), 57-78.
- Flexner, A. (1915). Is social work a profession? *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction*. Chicago, IL: Hildmann Printing.
- Fram, M. S. (2004). Research for progressive change: Bourdieu and social work. *Social Service Review*, 78(4), 553-576.
- Garrett, P. M. (2007a). Making social work more Bourdieusian: Why the social professions should critically engage with the work of Pierre Bourdieu. *European Journal of Social Work*, 10(2), 225-243.
- Garrett, P. M. (2007b). The relevance of Bourdieu for social work: A reflection on obstacles and omissions. *Journal of Social Work*, 7(3), 355-379.
- Grenfell, M. J. (2004). *Pierre Bourdieu: Agent Provocateur*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Hearn, J. (1982). Notes on patriarchy, professionalism and the semi-professions. *Sociology*, 16(2), 184-202.
- Honneth, A., Kocyba, H., & Schwibs, B. (1986). The Struggle for Symbolic Order: An Interview with Pierre Bourdieu. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 3(3), 35-51.
- Horvat, E. M., & Davis, J. E. (2011). Schools as sites for transformation: Exploring the contribution of habitus. *Youth & Society*, 43(1), 142-170.
- Houston, S. (2002). Reflecting on habitus, field and capital: Towards a culturally sensitive social work. *Journal of Social Work*, 2(2), 149-167.

Hugman, R. (1996). Professionalization in social work: the challenge of diversity. *International Social Work*, 39(2), 131-147.

Ignatow, G. (2009). Why the sociology of morality needs Bourdieu's habitus. *Sociological Inquiry*, 79(1), 98-114.

Jenkins, R. (1992). *Pierre Bourdieu*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Kadushin, A. (1976). Men in a woman's profession. *Social Work*, 21(6), 440-454.

Kita, E. (2011). Potential and possibility: Psychodynamic psychotherapy and social change with incarcerated patients. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 39(1), 9-17.

Lamont, M. (2010). Looking back at Bourdieu. In: E. Silva and A. Warde (Eds.), *Cultural Analysis and Bourdieu's Legacy: Settling Accounts and Developing Alternatives* (pp. 128-141). New York, NY: Routledge.

Lane, J. F. (2000). *Pierre Bourdieu: A Critical Introduction*. London, UK: Pluto Press.

Latour, B. (1996). *Aramis, or, the Love of Technology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2012). *Phenomenology of Perception*. (D. Landes, Trans.). London, UK: Routledge. (Original work published in 1945).

Morris, P. M. (2008). Reinterpreting Abraham Flexner's speech, "Is social work a profession?": Its meaning and influence on the field's early professional development. *Social Service Review*. (82)1, 29-60.

Myles, J. F. (2004). From doxa to experience: Issues in Bourdieu's adoption of Husserlian phenomenology. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 21(2), 91-107.

National Association of Social Workers. (1999). Code of Ethics. Retrieved from:

<http://www.naswdc.org/pubs/code/code.asp>.

- Ovenden, K., & Bourdieu, P. (2000). The politics of protest. *Socialist Review*, 242, 18-20.
- Peillon, M. (1998). Bourdieu's field and the sociology of welfare. *Journal of Social Policy*, 27(2), 213-229.
- Piaget, J. (2006). The stages of the intellectual development of the child. In B. A. Marlow & A. S. Canestrari (Eds.), *Educational Psychology in Context: Readings for Future Teachers* (pp. 98-103). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Pileggi, M., & Patton, C. (2003). Introduction: Bourdieu and cultural studies. *Cultural Studies*, 17(3-4), 313-325.
- Reamer, F. G. (1993). *The Philosophical Foundations of Social Work*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Reid, P. N., & Edwards, R. L. (2006). The purpose of a school of social work: An American perspective. *Social Work Education*, (25)5, 461-484.
- Reisch, M., & Andrews, J. (2002). *The Road Not Taken: A History of Radical Social Work in the United States*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Sartre, J. P. (1963). *The Problem of Method*. (H. E. Barnes, Trans.). London, UK: Methuen. (Original work published in 1960).
- Sayer, A. (2010). Bourdieu, ethics and practice. In: E. Silva and A. Warde (Eds.), *Cultural Analysis and Bourdieu's Legacy: Settling Accounts and Developing Alternatives* (pp. 87-101). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Schinkel, W. (2003). Pierre Bourdieu's political turn?. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 20(6), 69-93.
- Schinkel, W. (2007). Sociological discourse of the relational: the cases of Bourdieu & Latour. *The Sociological Review*, 55(4), 707-729.

- Schirato, T., & Webb, J. (2003). Bourdieu's concept of reflexivity as metaliteracy. *Cultural Studies*, 17(3-4), 539-553.
- Sewell Jr, W. H. (1992). A theory of structure: Duality, agency, and transformation. *American Journal of Sociology*, 98(1), 1-29.
- Shulman, L. (1991). *Interactional Social Work Practice: Toward an Empirical Theory*. Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock Publishers, Inc.
- Stabile, C. A., & Morooka, J. (2003). Between two evils, I refuse to choose the lesser. *Cultural Studies*, 17(3-4), 326-348.
- Stolberg, S. G. (2013, September 5). On the edge of poverty, at the center of a debate. *The New York Times*, pp. 1A.
- Taylor, C., & White, S. (2001). Knowledge, truth and reflexivity: The problem of judgment in social work. *Journal of Social Work*, 1(1), 37-59.
- Wacquant, L. (2002). The sociological life of Pierre Bourdieu. *International Sociology*, 17(4), 549-556.
- Waquant, L. (2008). Pierre Bourdieu. In R. Stones (Ed.), *Key Sociological Thinkers* (pp. 261-277). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Waquant, L. (2010). Crafting the neoliberal state: Workfare, prisonfare, and social insecurity. *Sociological Forum*, 25(2), 197-220.
- Weiss-Gal, I., & Welbourne, P. (2008). The professionalisation of social work: a cross-national exploration. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 17(4), 281-290.
- White, S. (1997). Beyond Retroduction? Hermeneutics, reflexivity and social work practice. *British Journal of Social Work*, 27(5), 739-753.