

Entrepreneurial agency and field relations: A Realist Bourdieusian Analysis

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Abstract

This article addresses the problem of understanding and assessing how entrepreneurial and self-employed workers engage with economic *fields* as they pursue their interests. It considers the differing experiences of entrepreneurial workers by developing a transferable approach to studying the relations between their environments, practices and values. The approach developed combines Bourdieusian and critical realist scholarship to explore qualitative data about the networking practices of 25 self-employed and entrepreneurial human resource consultants who competed in a conurbation in the North of England. We argue that the form of analysis that develops, which we call Realist Bourdieusian Analysis, reveals more about the causal properties of the social formations entrepreneurial workers navigate than analyses that are limited within each lexicon. Arguably, combining Bourdieusian analysis and critical realism enriches our understanding of the constituent parts of economic fields, the resources entrepreneurial workers access through them, and agents' relations, experiences and reflexive struggles. This novel approach, we argue, facilitates deeper appreciation of these workers' experiences and more insightful critique of existing supports to entrepreneurship, as well as the possibility of prescribing policy supports that might enable workers within the field studied. The analysis concludes by highlighting the practical, theoretical and methodological contributions of this research.

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Introduction

Theoretically, this article asks how Bourdieu's theory of practice might be extended by situating it within a critical realist ontology, and we argue that rereading Bourdieu from the point of view of critical realist scholarship (CRS) facilitates novel insights into emerging social relations. The theoretical synthesis proposed emerged from an iterative process as the authors struggled to understand and explain a qualitative dataset. The data comprise interview transcripts with 25 respondents who were entrepreneurial human resources (HR) consultants who lived and worked around a conurbation in the north of England. Respondents were asked about (i) the properties of the regional economic *field* they worked in, and (ii) how they engaged with this field as they developed their businesses. We expected these lines of questioning would enable contributions to knowledge of regional supports to entrepreneurial careers (see Malecki, 2012; Woolcock, 1998; Woolcock and Narayan, 2000), whilst also enhancing our understanding of the lived experiences of entrepreneurial workers in a *networked society* (see also Castells, 1996; Wittel, 2001).

Bourdiesian theory demonstrates both structure and movement within structures: how structures influence individual thought and action, and how individuals also replicate, create or transform these structures (Sallaz and Zavisca, 2007). However, we found Bourdiesian *middle-range* concepts (e.g. *forms of capital*), or those that illuminate the spaces or phenomena between the macro (*field*) and micro (*habitus*) levels of analyses, less precise for interpreting our respondents' descriptions of the setting and their experiences within it. Consequently, we found ourselves borrowing and incorporating concepts and methods developed within CRS.

In relation to the properties of the economic field (i), we found CRS categories (Fleetwood, 2015) useful for deconstructing the regional field studied in terms of its constituent parts – henceforth *field elements*. We then assess these field elements in terms of the resources (forms of capital, Bourdieu, 1986) that the respondents embodied, used, accessed, transformed and exchanged in their relations *within* field elements. As will be seen, opportunities for business and network development were variously formal or informal, periodic or sporadic, organized or ad hoc – resulting in social relations of different types that related to distinctive resources (e.g. skills, information, products, tools, clients etc.). Consequently, drawing on a variety of middle-range categories was enabling as it facilitated the discovery of the causal parts (field elements) of the field studied, and demonstrated how these field elements were nested and interrelated.

In relation to the experiences of skilled entrepreneurs in a networked society (ii), we found CRS analytical methods (see Archer, 2003, 2010, 2012) useful because they encourage researchers to separate the properties of the context from the projects and strategies of the respondents. We found this separation useful for understanding the reflexive struggles described by respondents, how these emerged from relations with field elements, and how these struggles also contributed to the nature of the setting as a

distinct field (see also Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). As will be seen, respondents were reflexive as they defended their approaches to business practice, and so their reflections on their practices positively represented the nature of their own engagement with field elements, whilst they could also be disparaging about the practices of other consultants (see also Sayer, 2005).

Finally, we also found CRS analytical methods (see Edwards et al., 2014) useful when designing and executing the analysis. The outcome, we argue, is a more complete and compelling method for assessing regional supports to entrepreneurial careers, and entrepreneurial experiences within regional economic fields, which can be transposed to analyses of other regional fields and different cadres of entrepreneurial agent.

The article is structured as follows. We start with a theoretical review which outlines Bourdieu's theory of practice and existing Bourdieusian contributions to entrepreneurship research. This review is used to substantiate our claim that moving Bourdieusian scholarship towards CRS results in novel insights that contribute to research on entrepreneurial careers. An alternative methodology, which takes account of CRS categories and analytical methods, is then introduced, and the data are presented in line with the new analytical method proposed. A discussion then reflects on the usefulness and general applicability of the analytical method proposed, before conclusions are then drawn.

Bourdieu's theory of practice

Bourdieu's lexicon is widely used and celebrated. In self-employment and entrepreneurship studies his work has been used to explore migration (Nowicka, 2013; Vershinina et al., 2011), class (Anderson and Miller, 2003), learning (Karataş-Özkan, 2011), culture (Spigel, 2013), rural economies (Sutherland and Burton, 2011), philanthropy (Shaw et al., 2011) and gender (Marlow and Carter, 2004; Vincent, 2016). Arguably, his framework is broadly applicable because it allows for deconstruction and reconstruction of the social world via core concepts: *fields*, or variously textured social settings; *capital*, the economic, cultural, social and symbolic resources of value within these settings; and *habitus*, the 'system of dispositions' (Bourdieu, 1984: 2) that affects agency within fields. In this framework, fields represent macro-level environments. Habitus represents the micro-level of personal proclivities and deportments. Forms of capital offer a middle range, which disaggregates fields in terms of the resources they contain and prioritize, and so offers a connection between fields and habituses. It is this *connective tissue*, the middle range between the macro and micro, which, we argue, benefits from a movement towards CRS.

Forms of capital

For Bourdieu, people use various resources, or forms of capital, to extend their interests. *Economic capital* is universally transposable via money and can be derived from assets (material resources, cultural artefacts, patents etc.) or remuneration (pay), or extracted in the form of profits (drawings, dividends etc.). For Bourdieu (1986), all forms of capital can be derived from economic capital, but only with time and effort in transformation: we can pay for our schooling and social connections, for example, but money facilitates the access, not the outcome.

Cultural capital exists in three forms (Bourdieu, 1986: 243). Firstly, it can be embodied as 'long-lasting dispositions of the mind' and as skills/abilities. Secondly, it can be objectified as cultural goods, such as pictures, books and machines, which are made and valued in contextually specific ways. Third, it can be institutionalized, such as within the education and qualifications systems. It thus includes, inter alia, abilities, artefacts and formal institutions. Cultural capital can be either individually possessed or collective, such as when there is normative agreement about the evaluation of cultural 'goods'. Objectified cultural goods, such as artwork or technologies, can be traded as commodities. Institutionalized cultural capital, such as qualifications, emerge from schooling systems and qualifications authorities, and so are structured within field relations. Cultural capital is thus heterogeneous and ontologically various.

Social capital is constituted of resources obtained from 'a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu, 1986: 251). The concept has been widely deployed to study entrepreneurs and their environments (see Cattell, 2004; Malecki, 2012; Westlund and Bolton, 2003; Woolcock and Narayan, 2000). Like cultural capital, social capital is heterogeneous and ontologically various. The specific form it takes depends on the other resources it relates to, and, consequentially, analyses distinguish several types of social capital (see Coradini, 2010). The sharing of more valuable forms of objectified cultural capital and the development of expertise (embodied cultural capital), for example, is associated with long-lasting cooperative relationships between more homogeneous social agents who trust one another and are willing to pool resources (Adler and Kwon, 2002). In contrast, more inclusive types of association, which tend to operate across broader social formations and amongst more heterogeneous agents (Granovetter, 1973), are associated with access to information (namely, cultural capital), which is likely to result in novel activities and practices (Burt, 2005). For the purposes of this article, a distinction is made between *deep* social capital, which implies trust and pooling or risking of personal resources, and *shallow* social capital, which implies less commitment and/or personal resource-risking.

As with cultural capital, forms of social capital emerge from or operate at various levels (families, firms, communities, regions etc.). These middle-range forms may have a good deal of *solidarity* (Bourdieu, 1986) or social capital supporting institutions and cultures (Westlund and Bolton, 2003), or these supports may be lacking. Forms of social capital can be fostered by civic engagement, investments in education, and developing predictable and benevolent institutional arrangements (see Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 1998). However, they can also diminish because of corruption and malpractice (see Woolcock and Narayan, 2000). For example, deeper forms of social capital may be good for exchanging opportunities and know-how, but they are also associated with cronyism and a failure to innovate beyond an in-group (Adler and Kwon, 2002). Likewise, shallower connections can be exploited if one side of the relationship has little at risk, such as where 'structural holes' (Burt, 2005) and bounded rationality (Williamson, 1986) are used to obtain disproportionate personal gains.

Symbolic capital is prestige and legitimacy: 'distinction' (Bourdieu, 1985: 731) derived from being identified as having the right forms of capital to succeed within a field according to its rules (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). It is therefore identified in terms of the recognition of other forms of capital. This legitimacy, then, facilitates access

Table 1. A key to forms of capital exchange/development.

	Economic capital	Cultural capital	Deep social capital	Shallow social capital
Economic capital		Buying new skills and products (1)	Investing in/with friends (2)	Paying for access (3)
Cultural capital	Selling abilities and goods (4)		Providing valuable cultural 'gifts' (5)	Providing information (6)
Deep social capital	Working together (7)	Receiving valuable cultural 'gifts' (8)		Withdrawing commitments (9)
Shallow social capital	Profiting from access (10)	Receiving information (11)	Interpersonal investment (12)	

to resources via 'favours' and other positive forms of recognition (see Bourdieu, 1990: 118–119). Those with the greatest volume of symbolic capital are more able to determine the 'official point of view' (Bourdieu, 1989: 22), which confirms authority and the ability to authorize history, affirm what people must do (order, prescriptions, directions) and define as fact what people have done (Bourdieu, 1989).

For Bourdieu (1986), as forms of capital are activated they are converted and developed. In other words, the power of capital, as deployed over time, is observed in levels or amounts of capitals that subsequently accrue. We know, for example, that in entrepreneurial careers social capital is fostered to access economic capital, or remuneration and work opportunities (see Barley and Kunda, 2004), and cultural capital, or new skills (see Adams and Demaiter, 2008). It is through the strategic deployment of capitals within the field that self-employed experts increase their overall stocks of resources (see also Özbilgin and Tatli, 2005). Forms of capital are thus intimately interconnected and mutually constituted in heterogeneous and ontologically various ways.

Given the limited number of forms of capital, developing an analytical framework that summarizes the ways in which they can be exchanged is straightforward (see Table 1). This framework is taken forward and used to analyse the field studied. Symbolic capital has been omitted from the framework as it emerges from recognition of other forms. Instead, it will be highlighted, in passing, where its development or use appeared to be significant.

Habitus

Habitus is typically tacit and subconscious, internalized via socialization and enculturation. Habitus represents agents' sense and understanding of the legitimacy of the specific contest for capitals that agents are engaged with. Some argue Bourdieu underplays the role of conscious deliberation in human action (Elder-Vass, 2010; Jenkins, 2002). In Bourdieu's words, habitus 'can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing conscious aiming at ends of an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them' (Bourdieu, 1990: 53). However, his concept of reflexivity offers a way for social actors to consider their own social positions, potentially provoking habitus

and field change (Bourdieu, 1994). Bourdieu suggests that there is constant transformation, albeit towards either: (i) reinforcement and repetition, wherein any movement is still within the bounds of conformity; or (ii) towards deeper change, which requires the deployment of higher levels of reflexivity.

However, the potential for theoretical circularity is also apparent in Bourdieu's discourse: fields impel habituses, and habituses structure fields. This circularity is reflected in Bourdieusian analyses, which may fail to analytically separate the properties of the field from the properties of agents (*habitus*). De Clercq and Voronov's (2009) Bourdieusian analysis of entrepreneurs, for example, asserts: 'identities and external environment get jointly and simultaneously co-created' (397). Consequentially, Archer (2010) accuses Bourdieusian analyses of *central conflation*, arguing that his lexicon is incapable of separating the independent causal influence of the parts of society (i.e. fields and field elements) from those of the people (agents) who constitute it. For those committed to CRS, this is analytically unhelpful: we need to delineate the independent influences of the field and social agents, whose projects are variously engaged within fields.

Field

For Bourdieu, different fields contain distinctive species of capital in varying combinations and volumes. For example, the combination and volume of forms of capital needed to succeed in a field where musicians play (see Scott, 2012) are very different from those needed to compete in a field where HR practitioners consult. The distribution of capital affects objective relations between positions across fields by variously enabling agents and institutions. Access to forms of capital thus allows 'access to the profits that are at stake in the field, as well as their objective relations to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.)' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 97). Fields thus contain both distinctive forms of capital, which are contested locally, and objective (i.e. external) power relations (borne of forms of capital) that act on and through the individuals who constitute them.

Finally, fields also have *doxa*, or rule systems that may remain unchallenged, as '[s]ystems of classification that produce, in their specific logics ... positions in relations of production' (Bourdieu, 1977: 164). However, and as will be seen, these rule systems are subject to negotiation and challenge by reflexive social agents, so field and *habitus* are intimately related, as one side 'is a relation of *conditioning*: the field structures the *habitus* [whilst] the other side, it is a relation of knowledge or *cognitive construction*' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127, emphasis in original).

Analysis of the constraints fields impose on agents is surprisingly limited in existing Bourdieusian research on self-employment and entrepreneurial careers (see Vincent, 2016). Relevant theoretical reviews, for example, pay only passing attention to the field (De Clercq and Honig, 2011; De Clercq and Voronov, 2009; Spigel, 2013). De Clercq and Voronov (2009: 399), describe the field as variously demarcated and/or hierarchical arenas of struggle or 'competing logics'. Spigel (2013: 808) is similarly parsimonious, defining field as 'historically produced social spaces of rules, traditions and power relations'. Empirical studies appear similarly sparse. Lee and Shaw's (2016: 1737) study of

new firms defines it, briefly, as spaces in which actors ‘acquire the variety of forms of capital needed to secure dominant positions within the ‘fields’ (social, institutional and market) in which they operate’. Karataş-Özkan (2011: 882–884) loosely define the field as ‘the dynamic area where human agents struggle to accumulate different species of capitals that will influence their position’.

In the few Bourdieusian studies of entrepreneurship which take a regional perspective (Nowicka, 2013; Spigel, 2013), the concept is also minimally deployed. Spigel (2013) spends considerably more time unpacking ‘entrepreneurial cultures’ than field. Nowicka’s (2013) analysis prioritizes the notion of ‘social position’ within the field, rather than the field itself. She is even more diminutive in her definition of field, suggesting that the concept is ‘primarily metaphorical’ (Nowicka, 2013: 32), and so must offer limited access to causal efficacy of enduring social formations.

In our view, Bourdieusian scholars may fail to engage fully with the concept of field because the forms of capital framework, Bourdieu’s middle range, is less good for systematically deconstructing the field in terms of its constituent parts, or field elements. In other words, his theory lacks consistent concepts to identify the sub-structures, arrangements, articulations, mechanisms, organization, institutions (etc.) of fields. Consequently, Bourdieusian scholars must either set aside any consideration of causal properties of this middle range, despite its apparent import within the forms of capital framework, or they must find their own way to deconstruct and reconstruct elements of the field. Furthermore, this de/reconstruction work is rendered even more difficult if one assumes that field and habitus are simultaneously co-created, as this rather obscures the imposition that middle-range phenomena make on the relations between the two. In the following section, we propose a synthesis of CRS and Bourdieusian theory that, we argue, facilitates and assists this deconstruction and reconstruction work.

Realist concepts and Bourdieusian research

Arguably, whilst Bourdieu is not as guilty of central conflation as Archer (2010) protests, the Bourdieusian lexicon can be developed with a movement towards CRS. As demonstrated above, species of capital emerge within heterogeneous and ontologically various phenomena, and so concepts and methods that help to identify these phenomena (or field elements) are analytically useful for identifying the determinations that fields impose. We argue that this is where CRS can help.

Bhaskar (1993) uses the metaphor *laminated system* to describe the relations between phenomena that constitute all natural and social orders. The concept transcends notions of field, and describes the universe as layered or hierarchically organized *open systems of interacting entities*.

For Bhaskar (1979, 2008), all entities have their own irreducible *causal powers* and *properties*. Schools and businesses, for example, are social entities (*agencies* or *organizations*) that affect outcomes (mass education and production), which their parts (classrooms, pupils, teachers, factories, workers etc.) cannot accomplish in isolation. Entities and classes of entity are thus rendered distinctive in terms of the specific powers and properties they possess – their *essences* (see O’Mahoney, 2012).

Arguably, the powers and properties, or essences, of social entities (*agencies* and *organizations*) can be efficiently worked out in terms of the resources (forms of capital) which shape their internal (and external) relations. Schools are constituted of (specifically resourced) classrooms, pupils and teachers (etc.). Businesses are constituted of (specifically resourced) units of production (e.g. factories, workers etc.). These resource-based constitutions affect outcomes, such as levels of student attainments or rates of production.

Schools and businesses also reside *within* 'higher-level' fields (namely, laminated systems): schools reside within the field of education; businesses reside within economic fields. Furthermore, their specific relations with other entities within these laminated systems (i.e. their relations with regulators, governments, competitors etc.) also affect the specific emergence of elements of fields. Overall, the powers and potentials of social entities (*agencies* and *organizations*), which can be known in terms of the resources they contain, thus combine and interact, across levels, to form the *generative structures* or *causal mechanisms* that impel emergent patterns in events within fields (namely, laminated systems).

For the purposes of this article, we draw on Fleetwood (2015), who develops CRS concepts that facilitate the further disaggregation of fields and field elements. He suggests that fields can be explored in terms of their respective *social structures*, *organizations*, *mechanisms* and *institutions*, each of which is explored in the following.

Social structures are 'latticeworks of internal relations between entities [agents/agencies] that may enable and constrain (but do not determine) the plans and actions of agents who reproduce and/or transform these relations' (Fleetwood, 2015: 95–97). We use this concept to refer to types of relations between specific types of agent, such as those of employers and workers, teachers and pupils, sub-cultures, races, genders and classes, which often interact as they transcend fields (namely, laminated systems). Using this term allows researchers to examine which types of relations constitute the field studied, and to study these relations in terms of the resources (forms of capital) and resource exchanges through which they can be known.

Organizations identify middle-range field elements (i.e. *agencies*) that are both entities and 'special institutions' (Hodgson, 2006). They have boundaries to establish membership, forms of internal sovereignty within jurisdictions, and defined roles and responsibilities, which are often consciously designed. They contain their own habitus of implicit (norms, values, preferences) and explicit (rules, codes, laws) institutions, which govern their conduct. Organizations are 'things in themselves' that act independently within fields in terms of their own constitutions (Bourdieu, 2005: 205). We can, then, consider how organizations shape flows of resources by identifying: the types of organizations that agents are engaged with; the forms of resources that can be accessed, developed and exchanged therein; and how engagement with these organizations is reflexively evaluated and contested.

Mechanism, a second middle-range concept, is used by Fleetwood as a catch-all for specific or identifiable relational field elements, which are neither organizations nor reducible to the actions of an individual. Whilst the term is seldom used by Bourdieusian scholars (cf. Bebbington, 2007), in CRS the term is used to identify specific, enduring and distinctive *causal assemblages* or relational forms (see also Elder-Vass, 2010).

Mechanisms can have greater or lesser degrees of permanence. Amongst entrepreneurs, for example, they may emerge from the properties of relatively fleeting dyadic contractual relations between individuals, or they may inhere within small groups who 'work together' over longer periods of time. Mechanisms may be within organizations, such as human resources 'architectures' (see Lepak and Snell, 1999), or between them, as specifically constituted inter-organizational relations (see Vincent, 2005). More generally, and for the purposes of this article, they are 'systematic configurations' (Fleetwood, 2015: 97) of agents, enacting institutions (norms, rites, customs, habits etc.) in relations with other entities (people, artefacts, materials, organizations etc.) in ways that affect and, potentially, transform resources (and relations) independently of other phenomena. We can, then, consider: the types of mechanisms agents are related through in the field studied; what forms of resources they access, develop and exchange within these mechanisms; and how engagement with these mechanisms is reflexively evaluated and contested by participants.

Institutions refers to a micro-level of customs, rules, mores, norms, obligations, rituals and values (etc.), and so corresponds to Bourdieu's concept of *doxa*. We recognize that the term 'institution' is used to refer to a variety of phenomena (customs, mores, rules etc.), and so therefore needs further development. However, as the aim of this article is to demonstrate the usefulness of CRS to Bourdieusian scholarship, we do not undertake this task here. Instead, we take it at 'face value' that institutions (*doxa*) constitute a foundation or micro-level of rules, customs (etc.) that condition the emergence of 'higher-level' field elements (mechanisms, organizations, social structures). Further, institutions often become habituated and rooted in the nervous system – that is, as tacit, subconscious, affective (Fleetwood, 2015) – so they also correspond to the 'structuring' or subconscious aspects of *habitus*.

The reflexive agent

Whilst we might follow institutions subconsciously or habitually, we are also reflexive about them. Indeed, Archer (2003) argues that forms of reflexivity, or *inner conversations*, rather than habituses, are the motor of social agency – one way or another, actors always *choose* which projects they want to pursue, and it is these choices which impel social stability or social change. This does not preclude actors being habitual, as agents are routinely engaged with specific practices (see also Elder-Vass, 2010). Reflexivity and habitus thus emerge *in situ*, or in relation to the present circumstance, and so their forms must be determined empirically. We can, then, explore how agents reflexively contest the field studied, and what this contest suggests about subjective experiences and social (resource) relations within the field examined, as well as tendencies for social stability and change.

Arguably, there is considerable overlap and similarity between Bourdieusian and CRS conceptions of agency. Both argue that reflexivity about institutions (*doxa*) is the motor of social change. Archer (2012) perhaps goes furthest by associating complex modern social realities with *reflexivity imperatives*. These imperatives emerge because complex social orders (namely, fields or laminated systems) typically offer no standard rule systems to guide action, so agents cannot act based on consistent sets of institutions.

Consequentially, reflexivity is inevitably required when deciding what to do. A similar point is made in De Clercq and Voronov's (2009: 397) Bourdieusian study, which highlights how successful entrepreneurs must both 'fit in' and 'stand out' as they 'improvise their way through a world that remains in a constant state of flux'. *Entrepreneurial habitus* is thus described as necessarily reflexive, as it must challenge the existing institutions (doxa) to succeed (De Clercq and Honig, 2011). Reflexive struggles are thus critical to overcoming doxa (*institutions*), which are personally limiting (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992): people are creative as they 'play the game' and contest its rules.

Methods

Usefully, Bourdieu offers an analytic method for deconstructing fields (see Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 104–105). Analyses should (i) analyse the position of the field studied in relation to other fields, and (ii) map out the relations between actors and organizations which compete for the resources (capitals) that the field contains. Undertaking these forms of analysis enables scholars to (iii) place agents within their contexts, to understand how they behave in relation to this context and whether they are likely to succeed.

This approach is very similar to recent advances in methods from CRS (see Edwards et al., 2014) that resonate this approach. Vincent and Wapshott (2014), for example, use CRS to account for 'organizational mechanisms'. They propose a similar analytical staging to Bourdieu, which includes: (1) *configurational analysis*, to account for the articulation of the specific 'social context' (namely, field), and (2) *normative analysis*, to account for the 'ideas' (namely, inner conversation about institutions) that inform actors' proclivities for action. These two forms of analysis then facilitate (3) *field analysis*, in which (1) and (2) combine to describe emergent social phenomena.

In both approaches, analytical categories emerge from, or are grounded within, field specifics. However, unlike traditional approaches to grounded theory, which seek to bracket off existing theory and carry out an entirely inductive analysis (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967), in these approaches theory is essential to constructing the social world, either as a laminated system of interacting entities or as a field in which specific forms of capital are contested. In the following study, we extend an analysis that is empirically grounded in the field studied and theoretically grounded in CRS (see also Kempster and Perry, 2014) and Bourdieusian categories (see also Goddard, 2004).

Data collection

Developing a representative sample was difficult because there was no single list or register of HR consultants. Most (19) were identified using a 'snowball' sampling strategy. This strategy, which started with two consultants who were known to the researchers, was useful because it created opportunities to explore social networks from different points of view. Four respondents were identified by 'cold-calling' HR consultants. Two respondents were identified by participating in events organized by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), the national professional association for HR managers. Attendance at these meetings also allowed observations of consultants' networking practices.

The sample (17 women and eight men) reflects the gender balance within the industry (see Thwaites and Jennsion, 2006). All but two of the respondents had previously held full-time jobs at managerial grades within their profession, which conferred legitimacy. Ten respondents had been 'generalist' HR managers, who oversaw and participated in the operational development of various HR practices. Seven had oversight roles, as HR directors, two were specialist trainers and two were specialist recruiters. One had been a national employment relations manager, and another had been a national training manager. The two respondents who did not have management-level experience within the HR profession claimed legitimacy in other ways. One was a retired policeman who owned an employment law consultancy. The other had been an HR officer and held a relevant master's-level degree. Overall, although it is impossible to say whether this sample is representative of the population, its apparent diversity suggests the dataset is a good opportunity to learn (Stake, 2006).

Interviews lasted between 32 and 90 minutes, with the average being just under an hour. Around 1500 minutes of conversation were recorded and transcribed, producing over 200,000 words. The interviews were semi-structured to understand the distinct types of 'network' that the respondents were engaged with. Interviewees also discussed the following: how and where they developed their businesses; how and when they engaged with their fields' 'networking opportunities', and how these were organized; and how respondents accessed resources from various places within the field. These lines of enquiry enabled configurational analysis, or mapping the relations within and between field elements. Respondents were also asked about their preferences when networking, to identify the forms of practice they disliked or favoured, and why this was the case. These lines of enquiry involved constantly asking 'why' until underlying reasons for engaging with the identified field elements emerged. These lines of questioning also encouraged respondents to reflect on their activities and the ideational struggles they engaged with.

The research continued to seek respondents until no new stories emerged, either about respondents' networking and business development opportunities or their preferences in these areas. At this point, it was assumed that the point of *theoretical saturation* had been reached, as engagement with the field resulted in very little incremental learning (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967). As the research was informed by CRS, two forms of saturation were considered (see Vincent and Wapshott, 2014). *Field saturation* occurs when new interviews result in little incremental learning about the objectifiable social formations within the field. *Agential saturation* occurs when new interviews reveal little incremental learning about subjective engagement with the field. Seeking these alternative forms of saturation enables the researcher to analytically separate causal influences of the parts of the laminated system (namely, field) and social agency, as data are collected and analysed.

Data analysis

The analysis, which is summarized in Table 2, was undertaken in several stages, although it should be stressed that the analysis was not a simple linear process, but one that oscillated between various middle-range concepts as the authors struggled to reconcile CRS and Bourdieusian concepts. The outcome thus reflects the theoretical assimilation of CRS and Bourdieusian scholarship developed in the first half of this article.

Table 2. A Realist Bourdieusian Analysis.

Field elements		Forms of capital	Institution/doxa	Emergent reflexive struggles
Mechanisms	Contractual mechanisms	Contracting with clients (a)	Cultural capital exchanged for economic, and vice versa (4). Identified as economic base of contractor–client relations, which could also result in (11, 12).	Contractual norms (day rates, time periods, retainers) Fostering client relations
		Referral fees (b)	Social capital exchanged for economic, and vice versa (3, 10). Identified as economic base of referrer–referee relations.	How much to charge? How long to work with one client? Which contracts to target?
	Relational mechanisms	Collective delivery (c)	Economic capital extracted from cultural capital relations, facilitating (a), but based on (7) – social capital depth between contractors depends on level of cultural capital they exchange as they serve the client (c+ or c–). Identified in terms of an economic base of (multi)contractor–client relations.	Contractual norms (percentages) Cooperation (c+)/collaboration (c–) Who to work with? Is my in-group adequate?
		Non-competitive exchanges (d)	Cultural capital differences enabling weak social capital developments – as encouraged by economic base (b). Identified as cooperation in identifying clients between economic agents in adjacent markets.	Who to work with? What is my core competence? Do I have the right associates?

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Field elements		Forms of capital	Institution/doxa	Emergent reflexive struggles
Organizations	Informal organizations	In-groups (e)	Gift exchange Concealing strength of key ties	Who to work with? How do I maintain reciprocity whilst competing?
		Associate groups (f)	Opportunity development (via cross-selling)	How do I know who to trust?
	Formal organizations	Employment agencies Networking facilitators	Network exploitation Persistent participation	Whether to avoid? How to compete? Are these organizations personally useful? Are the values of these organizations complementary or competitive?
		Professional associations	Persistent participation Communities of practice/learning norms	Whether or how to use these organizations to promote self-employed interests?

The primary classification system was the identification of field elements, using Fleetwood's (2015) categories. His middle-range concepts – mechanisms and organizations – were used to identify the field elements that respondents described as significant for their own business outcomes. These field elements were then analysed, using Bourdieusian and CRS concepts, in a manner that is hierarchical, building upwards from an economic base, and not arbitrary, because it develops from the theoretical ground-work undertaken in this article. The primary categories for analysing the constitution (and powers) of field elements was Bourdieu's forms of capital framework, although this analysis also identifies social structures (relations between positions) within and between field elements (see also Vincent, 2016). The field elements identified were also analysed in terms of the institutions, or doxa, and in terms of the types of reflexive struggles the agents experienced as they related with and co-created field elements.

To expedite this analysis, the italicized numbers and letters in parentheses, taken from the tables, such as (7) (*d*), are used as shorthand in the following paragraphs to identify the middle-range phenomena within the field studied. This shorthand enables the analysis to be sensitive to the local specificity of the field, whilst also maintaining a link to the theoretical vocabulary we developed to understand it. The following sections thus unpack Realist Bourdieusian Analysis.

Mechanisms

The respondents' descriptions of their working practices suggested two types of mechanisms were significant: *contractual mechanisms* and *relational mechanisms*. The following sections explain these mechanisms and how they were related, the capital exchanged through them, the institutions on which they were based, and the reflexive struggles entrepreneurial agents engaged with.

Respondents accessed economic capital via two types of *contractual mechanisms*: first, *contracts with clients*, through which HR consultants traded on cultural capital in the form of services, for fees (4, 7), and, second, *referral fee payments* were mechanisms through which they traded social capital and economic capital, or fees (3, 10). Both involved compliance with (institution/doxa) and advocacy for various forms of contractual relationships between parties to economic exchanges: the righteousness of these forms of exchange was seldom questioned, although, as we shall see, the legitimacy of specific manifestations of these mechanisms was a matter for struggle.

Contracts with clients (a) were variously constituted. Most of the respondents (16 of the 25) developed long-term relationships with small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) which, typically, did not employ HR professionals. Respondents sold HR services, such as writing basic policy documents, helping with recruitment and dealing with disciplinary issues, to these clients for fees (4). Having relationships with a range of SMEs resulted in a steady flow of repeat business, which maintained incomes. These contracts were typically organized around 'day rate' norms (institution/doxa), which appeared to reflect the consultants' previous experiences (embodied cultural capital). Day rates of £300 were 'normal'. Only a few respondents, with less experience, charged less than around £300, and only a few respondents, who had more senior roles prior to becoming self-employed, charged more.

Higher-status work, which related to larger contracts with higher day rates (4), typically came from larger clients. These tended to have in-house HR services, but occasionally needed more specialist HR skills. This type of work included handling senior appointments, developing novel HR systems, competency audits and skills needs analysis. Respondent 8, who claimed to do a lot of this work, charged up to £1000 per day. She claimed to have one client that resulted in over £60,000 of business and another that resulted in over 100 days' work. Relationships with larger clients thus appeared to be very lucrative. Consultants could also foster symbolic capital, as testimonials could be posted on websites and 'bragging rights' could be claimed when networking.

Other work was described as lower status. *Interim contracts*, which were individually held and often came from employment agencies (see below), appeared unattractive. These contracts, which stipulated working time expectations in terms of days per week and minimum periods of employment, could be particularly time-consuming. They were typically for well-defined projects, maternity leave or cover for long-term illness. Respondent 21 refused to do interim work because it was 'like a proper job'. Respondent 9 said she only considered interim work if it was 'very short term'. Three respondents [1, 9 and 15] did mention that they took *retainers*, or regular payments from SME clients, which guaranteed a quick response to HR issues over a set period. However, rather than servicing interim contracts themselves, six respondents sought to redistribute any interim contracts they identified within their networks, acting as agent rather than executor.

Crucially, larger interim contracts could reduce time for business development. For example, Respondent 12 took an interim contract as a generalist HR manager with a local firm, and this contract 'turned into two and a half years of work'. Although this suited him at the time, as he was a single parent, he was struggling to place himself in work at the time of the research. He claimed that the value of his networks had diminished, as delivering large contracts could prevent business development activities. Indeed, many consultants had 'a level of paranoia', in the words of Respondent 22, about the relationship between paid work and non-paid business development activities, as Respondent 13 also reflected:

It's been feast and famine to a certain extent, but you can see it coming because the diary has a lot of white space and that's the time to either say [names himself], 'have you got anything else or do I need to go out and actually do some business development work?' (Respondent 13)

Respondents also reported that fostering relationships with clients (12) could create opportunities within that client's network (11). For example, Respondent 17 delivered HR services to one veterinary clinic and then, through this contact, was referred to further contracts with other veterinary clinics. Respondent 22 commented on similar experiences in the tourist industry. Using reflexivity to selectively invest in client relationships (12) appeared to be a key component of respondents' strategies and habitus, as Respondent 14 reflected:

I am very aware that I would try and promote the sort of environments and cultures I've worked in, if I think that's the fit. If it is public sector I do play on my police experience ... I have just

been talking to a manufacturing company ... they were painting this really bad picture of their ruffy-tuffy workforce, and so right, let's pull on my experience of manufacturing ... So, yes, I would use that and play on it, [however] they are more likely to say yes if someone has recommended me, so I know that those networks are important. (Respondent 14)

The possibility of more business also led consultants to be reflexive about fees, when they should start to charge clients, and what to charge, as Respondent 7 reflected:

A lot of it is *ad hoc* HR. We call it 'pay-as-you-go' HR, because we don't charge you the same fee, we don't charge a monthly fee, we just [pauses] It's not a case of 'Right, we press a button, the clock starts ticking', it's a case of, if it's a five-minute conversation, and we just give them a quick answer, then we don't charge them. But if it leads down to a disciplinary where we need to produce documentation, be onsite for a meeting to help dismiss, discipline, whatever, then we'll start charging at that point. (Respondent 7)

Referral fees (b) were paid when one agent or agency referred another agent to work, or when an 'associate' was invited to work alongside an HR consultant who developed and negotiated a larger contract. Referral fee norms (institution/doxa) ensured the referrer was paid for time used in identifying opportunities (10), whereas the person referred to work paid for the opportunity (3). These fees took various forms. Sometimes the client paid the person who undertook the work, with this referee then sending a percentage of the fee to the referrer. Sometimes the referrer would charge the client and then pay the referee in a separate, if smaller, transaction.

The referral fee system was generally accepted and was, apparently, enforced by the threat of withdrawing commitments (9), as the following quote suggests:

It would be unethical, unprofessional for me to do it privately [i.e. without paying the referral fee]. If the company I'm an associate for found out they might say 'well we don't trust you', and that trust is very important ... They're not going to be passing on the leads to me which are lucrative and keep me busy in work at a good daily rate. They would just say 'well we don't want to work with you anymore'. (Respondent 8)

Fees varied between 10% and 50%, and their level was related to the size, value and type of work referred, although the quality of the relationship between the referrer and the referee also mattered. In some cases, no referral fees would accrue, such as when a trusted friend worked on a contract with an important client. Lower referral fees of 10% were typical for a small piece of work referred to a 'friend', or close and trusted associate. Higher fees (50%) accrued in the market for training services. Rates in between these extremes were also common. For example, Respondent 8 was happy to offer a 30% referral fee to a law firm because the work was with 'big clients' who also paid well and bolstered her reputation (symbolic capital).

Outcomes were locally and reflexively contested, depending on changing circumstances, as Respondent 16 reflected:

I did take 10% on this particular one [a contract she referred to an associate] but we're probably going to be talking about something else now because they want a lot more done ... 10% for 12

months' work is not a lot ... I am going to have that business conversation which basically says it may need to go up. (Respondent 16)

In another example of contested referral fees, Respondent 2 reported that she was working as an associate of a training consultancy. In a conversation with her client, she discovered that the training consultancy (the referrer) was charging that client 200% more than she received. She requested an increased day rate, which led to accusations of 'unprofessional conduct', because she had discussed day rates with a client. This association, which was clearly based on a shallow connection, ended, with commitments withdrawn (9).

Relational mechanisms emerged from distinctive combinations of economic interests and expertise. Two types or classes of relational mechanisms were identified: *collective delivery mechanisms* and *non-competitive exchange mechanisms*; each associated with a different contractual mechanism. Collective delivery mechanisms pooled contractors to deliver larger contracts to clients (a). Non-competitive exchange mechanisms facilitated referrals and any associated fees (b). Relational mechanisms were thus particular to contractual mechanisms (the economic base).

Collective delivery mechanisms (c) emerged when consultants identified a larger contract that they did not have the skills or capacity (time) to service independently. They could be dyadic, such as when a pair of consultants deliver work to a client, or involve larger groups. They could be *cooperative relationships* (c+) between individuals with similar skills, in which case contracts were for reasons of capacity, or they could be *collaborative relationships* (c-) between consultants with complementary skills, in which case delivery was built on synergies between trades.

An example of cooperation was offered by Respondent 11, a training expert, who had been working with a group of five associates to service a large contract to assess training outcomes for a public-sector organization. An example of collaboration was described by a specialist recruiter:

I've been drawn into the project to look at it from a recruitment perspective. [Small HR firm] is looking at that from the HR legal side of things and, then, somebody else who's a trainer, they provide ... the training aspects for businesses. So, between the three of us, we're working on something which will generate business for every one of us. (Respondent 18)

In collective delivery mechanisms, consultants worked together (7) and, in the case of cooperation, they typically needed to be engaged in more detailed cultural capital exchanges (5, 8) to meet client needs (hence c+). In contrast, where consultants collaborated, the need for detailed sharing of cultural capital decreased, but contractors still needed to exchange information and establish roles and relations (6, 10, hence c-). Consultants were thus required to be reflexive about the qualities of the contract and the people they worked with, as this would affect interactions (as evidenced below).

Non-competitive exchange mechanisms (d), in contrast, did not involve working together in delivering work, but outcomes could be identified in terms of social capital relations (3, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12). These mechanisms typically developed between agents with less similar skill sets. Agents could identify opportunities that they were

not qualified to deliver, and then pass these to others who had the skills necessary to complete the work. In these circumstances, referral fees would often be paid between agents, and this ‘oiled the wheels’ of the market by ensuring opportunities passed through social networks (10, 3).

A good deal of reflexive struggle was apparent when respondents identified be the ‘right’ associates to relate to. For example, HR consultants were often referred work by accountants and solicitors, who could not deliver the HR work themselves, and so some HR consultants sought to develop social capital with members of these professions (12), hoping to use these relationships to build bridges to clients (a). The employment law specialist (Respondent 1) stood out in this regard. He claimed to acquire 60% of his work from referrals from accountants, and so he was heavily engaged in networking events that accountants attended. In another example, Respondent 8 (see above) obtained many of her ‘big clients’ from a corporate lawyer, who was a friend of hers. Ultimately, this dyad (7) profited from the access one could provide to the other (3, 10).

These non-competitive exchanges resulted in respondents reflecting on their own abilities, especially when the opportunities identified were closer to their own expertise, as Respondent 22 suggested:

You come into an organization on the back of one particular discipline ... ‘Can you do X for us?’ You say ‘yes’ and they come back and say ‘great, can you do Y’, recruitment or whatever ... If you’re not careful, they say: ‘Well, what bloody hat are you wearing today, then? How many things do you know?’ So, on occasions I do say: ‘Yes, I could have a go at this and I am going to need a lot of time to develop material, which I think you could afford in terms of time, but you might be better off talking to my colleague’. And yes, I do make referrals. (Respondent 22)

Organizations

The mechanisms mentioned previously were supported in diverse ways by a variety of organizations, which we classified as formal and informal types. *Informal organizations* were enduring networks of consultants (variously formed) who worked together. They worked together to contract with clients, exchange referral fees, deliver work and exchange opportunities (a–d). Informal organizations were sub-classified as *in-groups* and *associate groups*. Whilst, in practice, these distinctions could be difficult to untangle, the distinction is conceptually purposive, as sub-types related to different resources. *In-groups* pooled HR consultants with similar cultural capital resources. *Associate groups* pooled a broader range of business agents with different but, potentially, complementary cultural capital resources. They were also associated with different depths of social capital, with in-groups pooling greater resources.

Formal organizations conformed more closely to Fleetwood’s (2015) definition (above). Respondents identified three types of organizations as having an influence on their practices. First, *employment agencies* sought to exploit social capital (10) by extracting fees from clients and contractors (3). Second, *network facilitators* emerged to develop the consultants’ shallow forms of social capital (10, 11, 12). Third, *professional associations* developed professional knowledge (embodied cultural capital) and social capital (1, 2, 5, 8, 12). The following sections detail each of these organizations, the

capitals exchanged and developed through them, the institutions they emerge from and the reflexive struggles they invoked from respondents.

Informal organizations were identified as *in-groups* and *associate groups*. *In-groups* were identified as durable relationships among consultants with similar skills. Many consultants described 'a handful' or 'seven or eight' of such relationships, with these groups typically including several self-employed HR consultants, as well as people from closely related professions, such as training. Members of these groups would meet regularly in pairs or small groups, often around more formally organized networking events (detailed below). These meetings were used to talk about most work-related matters. Where larger contracts were identified, consultants could call on in-group members to help service them (7), and so in-groups could be used to organize cooperative *collective delivery mechanisms* (c+).

Those with well-developed in-groups typically had established relations with clients (12), so in groups were not the main way they obtained remuneration. Instead, these relationships developed from cultural capital complementarities. Exchanges of cultural capital were habitual (institution/doxa) within in-groups (5, 8). Close associates would freely offer advice on various matters and exchange information. As Respondent 16 reflected:

We've got a group now of eight or nine of us ... We use each other as a skills bank, a knowledge bank ... There was an email came out on Friday. One of us will say 'Well, I've got this situation, anybody got any thoughts on it?' Or 'I'm thinking of doing this, does this sound right?' Sometimes it can just be work overload. (Respondent 16)

Maintaining in-groups, however, was not without its tensions, as favoured relationships sometimes required more self-conscious concealment. Where in-groups exchanged opportunities, cooperated in delivery and referred work, potentially for fees (a-d), this could be concealed from the group to maintain mutual reciprocity, as Respondent 9 reflected:

I think we're probably quite discrete in the group about working with each other because somebody might be sitting there thinking 'Oh, why didn't [someone] ask me to do that?' So, I think we're quite discrete about working with each other. (Respondent 9)

Associate groups increased the potential for agents, who did not compete between themselves for clients, to exchange opportunities (3, 6, 10, 11) and collaborate in offering services to clients (c-). These groups were sometimes quasi-formal organizations. One example was offered by Respondent 19. He owned an SME that, initially, sought to sell HR tools and self-help books to SME clients (4, objectified), before then using this initial contact to sell HR services (4, embodied). Although he did not employ HR consultants directly, his associates agreed to appear on the website of Respondent 9's company (5), and he then referred work to these consultants when it was identified, collecting a 20% referral fee when he did so (10).

Respondents appeared to be highly reflexive about the qualities of their in-group and associate group relations. These relationships were based on complex histories, in which

the perceptions of ability (cultural capital) and trustworthiness (symbolic capital) were considered, as Respondent 16 reflected:

There was a likeness of approach amongst those people whom I call my close colleagues. There was a way of working that was very similar in your ethics ... Well, I don't believe in anybody that wants to take the piss [*sic*]. I don't believe in anybody that takes a load of money for doing work that they haven't really done. (Respondent 16)

Whilst consultants could boast about the quality of their in-groups and associations, and they could also be disparaging about the reputations of others' networks, as Respondent 14 reflected:

I know there are a couple of people who are in networks that don't have a good reputation, and that's not just my view. There are a couple of names which would be mentioned in my little circle [and you'd get] a few sniggers. It's like, 'Oh beware, you're not thinking of working with them, are you?' (Respondent 14)

The promotion and guarding of the qualities of one's own network was an important part of 'the game'.

As highlighted in the introduction to this section, the *formal organizations* identified as significant by the respondents included *employment agencies*, *networking facilitators* and *professional associations*. The interests of employment agencies competed with those of the respondents. These agencies developed or exploited shallow forms of social capital to extract economic capital from HR consultants (*b*). They functioned as labour market intermediaries by placing HR experts in interim contracts. However, and as we saw above, the *interim contracts* they offered were typically viewed unfavourably.

The training market offered an extreme example. Both respondents who were training specialists engaged with training agents (3). Training contracts were usually relatively discrete, involving one or a few days' training of a specific type, so these contracts tended to be short-term, whether they were 'self-generated' or provided by an agency. Engaging through an agency thus offered considerable time savings as clients did not need to be identified, courted and obtained.

Given that referral fees could be comparatively large (see above), Respondent 2 was critical of the practices of training agencies, which she described as undermining the market:

So, they have a big group of associates that work for them for a daily rate, and they find the business ... I went to work [pauses] went to meet this particular guy who scours people's websites. Looks for testimonials ... and then contacts those companies ... He'll say 'Oh, who are you dealing with?' And he'll ring them and says he'll undercut them. It goes on all the time, but there's a few of us that have got ethics and won't do that. (Respondent 2)

Unsurprisingly, the existence of larger competitors and employment agencies made the consultants reflect on their own fees, as Respondent 3 suggested: 'We want to charge something that's reasonable, that we all feel comfortable with, that's reasonable, and we

know that some of the large consultancies charge three, four, five times as much as we might' (Respondent 3).

Networking facilitators included the Chambers of Commerce (henceforth Chambers) and 'Netco' (a pseudonym), a private-sector firm. These organizations sought to extend the social capital of the respondents in return for fees (3, 10).

There were two Chambers branches operating in the region, and these offered a variety of events, typically around meal times, where respondents could network. Some suggested the Chambers' events were of limited usefulness, as Respondent 5 opined:

If you go to a Chamber of Commerce networking lunch, you know, it's predominately male accountants and solicitors selling each other goodness knows what, in a relatively aggressive fashion, and most of the HR people I've spoken to, male and female, sort of shy away from that way of doing things. (Respondent 5)

However, as accountants and solicitors were often reliable sources of referrals (*d*), others, such as Respondent 1, found these events useful. Respondent 19 also found the Chambers meetings useful for developing his associate group (*f*).

In the other example, about half the respondents had, at one time or another, tried to connect with work through Netco. This fee-taking private-sector firm (3, 10) organized members into closed and artificially bonded 'cells' that each contained only one member of any occupation. Cell members would meet for breakfast, weekly, with each cell member having an obligation to refer work (*a*) to cell members. Netco membership thus encouraged more active information exchange between tradespeople who were not in competition (*d*).

Some respondents viewed Netco favourably and valued this social closure. Respondent 9, who acquired 'the majority' of her work from Netco, confessed:

I do like efficiency ... the key phrase for me was 'We'll teach how joining [Netco] can lock out your competitors' and I thought, 'Right, there's two other people in the room who do what I do, and they're my competitors. So, I'm going to sign up and join this group, here, and I'm going to lock them out.' And I literally made out my application in the middle of the meeting. (Respondent 9)

Others, however, were more disparaging about the qualities of Netco's system:

What [Netco] stands for is that I must refer you because you're the accountant ... I don't necessarily want to do that because unless I've worked with you as an accountant I don't know your nature of work. I also find it slightly insular ... I didn't want to do that. (Respondent 16)

The value and status of network support organizations was thus a matter of contention and, because forms of affiliation affected perceptions of legitimacy (symbolic capital), respondents were keen to talk up the virtues of their way of developing business, and deride those organizations that operated with institutions/doxa (norms, values etc.) that were different from their own.

Professional associations sought, primarily, to develop professional knowledge (embodied cultural capital) and social capital within the regional field. As well as the UK Government, which freely offers information (6) about how to set up as a self-employed trader or SME enterprise, the CIPD and a local HR Directors' Forum were important fee-taking organizations which (i) supported professional practice in HR (1) and (ii) provided networking opportunities to develop relationships with HR consultants and potential clients (a–e).

The CIPD makes money in the form of fees for membership (3) and HR-related products (1). Importantly, the CIPD achieved a 'Royal Charter' in 2000 and, since then, becoming a 'chartered' member requires demonstration of experience in professional practices at a level equivalent to a master's degree, and so membership conferred symbolic capital. All but a handful of respondents had, at one time or another, been members of the CIPD, although a few consultants with established businesses had left the organization.

Importantly, the CIPD requires members to engage with continuous professional development, and its fees provided access to a regular timetable of events, such as employment law updates or introductions to new tools and technologies, which supported professional development (1). These events, which were organized through regional branches in an equivalent way to Chambers, were a good opportunity to meet with and develop in-group relations (e) and to network with clients (12, 4).

Five respondents also sought to raise their profiles (symbolic capital) by acting as organizers of local branch events. Although some were adamant that their involvement was only about professional development (1), these respondents were acutely aware that their profiles were raised, as Respondent 3 suggested:

Whereas some people go to networking and they hand out their cards all the time, I've deliberately not gone down that route with CIPD ... that wasn't ever my reason for being on the Committee ... [However] I might have been writing the newsletter on a regular basis, my name might have been there. I haven't proactively said I'm looking for work because of it, but people are aware of me in that network. (Respondent 3)

Finally, to contract with larger clients, consultants had to foster closer relationships with senior staff from these organizations (12). Networking through a monthly HR Directors' Forum, at which senior HR practitioners would meet to discuss HR issues, was said to be useful for this activity. This group was exclusive, as members had to have director-level experience in HR to participate, and so it was not open to all.

Arguably, attendance at networking events was a persistent (doxic) habit for these consultants. The evidence suggested that they were obligated to attend networking events to benefit from the resources they contained, as Respondent 19 suggested:

[The HR Directors' forum] does create leads, but it creates leads from people who have seen you around. It goes back to that they have to know you, have to like you, have to trust you. They've seen you around and you have to make sure that you are seen around ... Once people start to think that you've got contacts or you know people, then they will start to come to you. (Respondent 19)

Failure to regularly attend networking events limited opportunities, as one respondent succinctly suggested: 'if you are a bit more peripheral then, sometimes, [attending a networking event] can be a bit of a waste of time' (Respondent 25). However, and whilst poor levels of participation in networking events could create difficulties (see also Vincent, 2016), the values and practices on display when networking were consistently contested:

I know some people who exploit and that really annoys me, some people – I call them 'professional networkers' – who get themselves into every group going, every time you turn up at a meeting, they're there. They have their business cards at the ready and you see them working the room, and I just think 'you don't have to do that'. People will get to know what you do and if they think you're credible. (Respondent 14)

Discussion: Entrepreneurial agency and field relations

This analysis reveals this field as a hierarchically organized relational structure that supported the various careers of our respondents. It appeared rooted in the economic necessities of the market (contractual mechanisms and financial means), to which field elements were variously orientated. Arguably, the field elements identified had specific powers, which emerged from the species of capital that the respondents developed and traded, and respondents had diverse strategies for engaging with the field elements identified. Some respondents chose to pursue a wide range of SME clients. Others devoted time and energy to pursuing larger clients, because these were prestigious and paid well. Some sought to derive a substantial part of their income from referral fees, acting as labour market intermediaries. These choices affected the relations, mechanisms and organizations through which they were engaged.

However, consultants often obtained income from a mixture of these sources, adapting their approaches to reflect their preferences and the field's present opportunities. Distinct types of social capital were available at various times and places, and this social capital could be transmuted into economic capital or cultural capital in various forms. These consultants thus had a variety of choices and could progress their career interests in many ways. Overall, although it was possible to point to winners and losers, with gender playing a significant role in affecting outcomes (see Vincent, 2016), the constitution of this field appears to be robust in that it supported different approaches to doing business.

Arguably, as this will not be the case for all fields (see Woolcock and Narayan, 2000), the type of mapping and categorical work undertaken in this article may be more useful in other settings in which entrepreneurial actors may lack the appropriate means to develop resources. Consequently, RBA might enable contributions to, firstly, policy debates around supports to entrepreneurship and regional development (see Bebbington, 2007; Spigel, 2013; Vershinina et al., 2011; Westlund and Bolton, 2003; Woolcock and Narayan, 2000). These contributions are concerned with identifying and potentially supporting economic development, and the method we extended here holds the possibility of identifying the existence (and absence) of opportunities to trade on specific forms of capital. Arguably, comparative institutional analysis, which might use Realist Bourdieusian Analysis to study dissimilar groups in the same setting or compare

outcomes for similar groups in different settings, is likely to be particularly good for identifying the causes of relative (dis)advantage, and a previous contribution (Vincent, 2016) offers a rudimentary example.

Unfortunately, this study was limited to one region, and respondents who managed to sustain self-employed careers, so the data offer few examples of unfulfilled ambitions. We can note that those (more typically women with working time constraints) who engaged extensively with referral fee payments and intern contracts appeared to be at a disadvantage (Vincent, 2016), and so this form of analysis is useful for differentiating actors in terms of their types and classes, but this study lacks comparative dimensions, which might better reveal local absences, to which practical and policy supports might be directed.

Secondly, our analysis was also directed at understanding the lived experiences of skilled self-employed workers in a networked society (see Castells, 1996; Wittel, 2001). The respondents were complicit and instrumental in using diverse types of social connections to get ahead. These respondents' experiences and deportments appeared analogous with affective conjuring or shape-shifting in that they transformed the qualities of relations and relationships to maintain appearances and/or further specific interests.

They reflected and engaged with different and, at times, contradictory personas in different settings. They were engaged scholars within the CIPD. They were active network exploiters in Netco. They were accomplices in associate groups. They were the caring friend in in-groups. They were dedicated suppliers in contractual mechanisms. They could not be all these things at once, but they did not need to be, because specific places demanded specific personas. This variance in how they represented themselves was directly affected by the forms of resources (forms of capital) that were accessed and transformed in different field elements: each had its own normative basis, rooted in the resources and relations these implied, and so the identification of this normative variety, and its corresponding resource-based antecedents, adds richness to our understanding of habitus that would be absent without a conceptual vocabulary to unpack field elements.

Their performances on these various stages were also not uncontentious. Those with developed in-groups could be depicted as cronies, whereas those who developed and benefited from large associate groups could be cast as exploitative. Entrepreneurial reflexivity thus appeared to require engagement with a geographically organized world of normative struggle, in which their work was experienced in terms of the ongoing process of validating their own approach to practice. These findings confirm Archer's (2010) view that reflexivity is essential in situations where competing logics exist (see also De Clercq and Voronov, 2009), or where no standard normative template can be assumed as always appropriate to specific situations.

However, specific institutions existed within the field elements that respondents were engaged with. They were constitutive of the doxa of the setting, and related to what was or was not 'proper conduct' within the field elements observed, even if these norms could also be reflexively contested. As such, these findings suggest that Bourdieu's approach (see Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), in which reflexivity is apparent in the art of the deployment and contest of habitus, holds firm. Reflexivity and more subconscious/impulsive action are thus both personal and situational. Whilst some CR scholars view

these matters as distinct: ‘the proportional contribution of *habitus* and reflexivity vary systematically with the order or reality in question’ (Archer, 2012: 76, emphasis in original), such distinctions are, arguably, personal and difficult to empirically determine. In our formulation, *habitus* is constituted of reflexivity, subconscious action, and the connective tissue of conceptual phenomena that link affectivity, via ‘deep’ or tacit understanding and conceptual knowledge, and then to the forms of inner conversation, communication and dialogue that are appropriate to the setting.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this article confirms that integrating Bourdieusian scholarship with CRS is analytically beneficial. Whilst the field is a relatively mute category in existing Bourdieusian research on entrepreneurial careers, when taken towards CRS, the field (namely, laminated system) becomes a vibrant and deep category that roots our understanding of forms of capital in middle-range phenomena (field elements), which then also provides novel insights into agents’ reflexive struggles within fields. As such, this article also contributes a new and potentially useful form of analysis, along with others who combine Bourdieusian and realist analytical categories (see Elder-Vass, 2010; Sayer, 2005).

Arguably, once the elements of Bourdieu’s field theory are broken down in terms of its ontologically heterogeneous elements, it appears to become compatible with CRS. Equally, when Fleetwood’s (2015) CRS-informed taxonomy is analysed in Bourdieusian terms, as constituted of forms of capital, the causal powers and potentials of the middle-range phenomena it identifies (social structures, organization, mechanisms and institutions) are also rendered more obvious and vivid. As such, we can conclude that there are ample grounds for mutual learning and exchange between communities of scholars engaged with CRS and Bourdieusian forms of analysis.

The article has contributed methodologically by developing a novel analysis of the anatomy of the field studied, and the ways in which actors were both engaged with and constitutive of it. The methods section of the article highlighted essential similarities between Bourdieusian scholarship and CRS. Both appeared to concur: analysis should move through characteristics of the field (namely, laminated system), the qualities of their identifiable elements, and, only then, how specific agents are engaged with them. In this article, we identified field elements in terms of their essential structure or form by: (i) engaging with the various resources they contain; (ii) identifying their doxa or rule systems, and how these conditioned (i); before (iii) exploring how agents were differently engaged in reflexive struggles as they competed for the resources they contained. Arguably, and in line with CRS, such analysis facilitates a more fine-grained appreciation of both the parts of society and the people it contains, without conflating one with the other.

As we saw in the discussion, this form of analysis enabled critical reflection on the constitution of the field studied, specifically in terms of the range of resources made available to the classes of agent studied (HR consultant) and how this conditioned (without determining) respondents’ experiences of work (see also Vincent, 2016). Arguably, this study, which focused on one type of respondent in one field, is somewhat limited:

comparative institutional assessments of diverse groups in the same or distinct settings are likely to throw up critical distinctions that merit or suggest specific policy or practical interventions. However, to the extent that Realist Bourdieusian Analysis has been more fully fleshed out and defined within the context of this article, the theoretical and methodological developments we suggest reveal new points of analytical departure and a novel approach to the study of complex social formations in which agents compete, entrepreneurially or innovatively, for resources.

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