

Abstract: This presentation will investigate the use of theory, in particular Pierre Bourdieu's Habitus, in researching library populations and developing a complex, multi-dimensional understanding of an important library community. By utilizing the framework of Habitus, we seek to investigate Pierre Bourdieu's thesis of Habitus, which is to say, a social theory of determinism that centralizes behavior without essentializing groups. The aim of the project is to study first-generation students and the issue of retention. Habitus, in many respects, speaks to an unwritten language, sense, or code (*le sens pratique*) in which certain members of a group are naturally and unconsciously conversant and which other members must constantly use cognitive energy to work within. The hope is to investigate some aspects of this language by studying both college-normative students (i.e., those for whom college was a foregone conclusion) and first-generation students to understand, perhaps, an aspect of the difference in experience and to use some of the findings to propose some sort of library intervention.

Of interest to attendees: application of theory to a practice, new methods of analysis of library populations, sharing of research methods, and possibly issuing a call for papers for an edited monograph on this topic.

Library Services for First Generation Students: Looking to Pierre Bourdieu, Habitus, and Understanding the Whole Student

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Introduction

(SLIDE 1) First I would like to thank the conference organizers for having us this morning. I am appreciative for the opportunity to speak with you all today. I think this is a terrific event and I've enjoyed attending and participating for the past couple of years. Additionally thank you all for coming to hear me talk; especially about critical theory, especially after lunch. This is a version of a paper I have given before and a project that I have been working on for quite a while, but this presentation represents a short summary of this previous work with updates that indicate the forward momentum that my research partner, Ashleigh Coren, and I have recently made. In fact, her coming onto the project in the past couple of months has been absolutely essential as her fresh ideas, experience, and expertise has dramatically helped to shape the future of this project. As I will get into later, Ashleigh has been able to help bridge the gap between the theoretical and the practical and has given new life to this project.

As I have written about for the Journal of New Librarianship, developing or working with external theory, meaning not stemming from library literature, can be fraught with unseen problems. As many who have worked within the field of critical librarianship and critical library instruction know, the theories developed in the educational sciences, or in this case sociology hold true, but often limited applicability in our field. As I hope to illustrate, however, applying critical theory does not have to indicate a strict adherence to typological models and can, as I believe we have done, demonstrate something more akin to a guiding philosophy. This is indicative even in the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy, itself a document influenced deeply by critical educational and sociological theory, but one which does not utilize these theories in the applied sense of the word in the same way a sociologist would. In fact, as many educational researchers have shown, strict adherence to theory is not often ideal. For example, a recent study utilizing habitus emphasized the corrective elements that can be found (wrongly in my interpretation of Bourdieu) through some uses of the theory.¹ I hope to demonstrate through this talk a mode of thinking about difference in the student experience and the flexibility of thought that dissuades harmful and problematic notions of essentialism— that is, the condensing of complexity into convenient stereotypes which you can imagine can be an issue with a student population such as first generation students. I will address this further, but this is an area of discomfort and self-conscious reflection that surrounds this project and is something we have had multiple conversations about. Our goals, as I hope becomes clear, are not to create a formula for the first generation experience (i.e. because a student is first generation they must do, X or

¹ Gaddis, S. Michael. “The Influence of Habitus in the Relationship between Cultural Capital and Academic Achievement.” *Social Science Research*, 2013.
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not understand Y), but to approach the design of instruction and outreach programming with a fuller understanding of the whole student and in this case help bridge some of the potential gaps between the languages of two fields; that of the college normative student and the causal accrual of academic language and expectations and those potentially less accustomed to certain elements of college life and therefore success.

As something of a guiding principle, an intellectual framework that aligns somewhat with this project and our use of critical theory is what the art critic John Berger discusses in the preface to his *Ways of Seeing* essays where he succinctly, but accurately defines the mission of critical theory that I wish to expand on. He describes a "process of questioning" that gives an explanation, but not an answer to a given work in his case, or phenomena in ours. With that, and given both my role here at UMD as the outreach librarian for "special populations," as well as a Ph.D student in the humanities, it is my belief and hope that library research—that is research relating to the advancement of library services—should reflect a greater application of sociological, ethnographical, and even anthropological forms of research. This is not a new idea, library studies have, and continue to use many of these methods, and do so more or less effectively, but I have been heartened by the more recent use of critical theory despite some pushback from some in our field. Foundational studies and work by James Elmborg, and recent work by Eamon Tewell have both indicated, across a span of about ten years, a reluctance by many in the field to bring critical theory into their own research and practice. In Tewell's recent 2016 study he found that many librarians that he surveyed did not see the benefit of introducing elements of critical information literacy into their instruction primarily as they say it detracting from their instructional goals. This is not an issue of right or wrong, but it is an issue, as I mentioned above, of a way of seeing and understanding.

(Slide 2) So from that hedged framing let's take a step further back and look particularly at the specific critical theory I'm looking to employ and a bit about the originator. From there we will move into how to connect theory to practice, by exploring the project origins, connections to Habitus, and some of the stumbling blocks along the way so far.

(Slide 3) Habitus is one of those theories that can, and has been, attached to almost any group. I first came to the notion of habitus through a paper on Glaswegian street gangs and the learned codes of behavior within that specialized group, but a quick search will bring any number of papers on the habitus of heroin addicts, of county club members, of preschool children, etc. and so on down the line. With that I thought, you know...why not libraries too? As I will get to, there seemed a particular exigency to certain populations of library users, and I wanted to reflect the populations that I have, for lack of a better phrase, access to. Habitus was most clearly explained to me through the cheeky, but academically sound paper, "So, how did Bourdieu learn to play tennis?" by Noble and Watkins. This article analytically but clearly demonstrates how habitus works and the background of the theory and I will be relying on aspects of their argument to help illustrate further elements today.

A quick note on Bourdieu himself. Bourdieu was a sociologist, philosopher, and something I yearn for these days: a public intellectual that isn't a lunatic. (Slide 4) Almost all of Bourdieu's work centers around the ideas we're discussing, but I would like to draw your attention to a couple of works, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, and *Distinction* in particular as they are considered monuments of Sociology and of Critical Theory. He is largely associated with the wave of 1960s French intellectuals like Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Jean Paul Sartre, but he did not necessarily share their politics— or at least not the same goals as Bourdieu who, despite his leftist leanings, was more skeptical than his colleagues about the power of

politics to change culture despite his contributions to the intellectual groundswell surrounding what can be summarized as the spirit of '68 – that is the growing dissatisfaction with the status quo in French education and political action. In fact, Bourdieu's polemical tract *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market* set him a little apart from some in the above list as this work was more rabidly anti-capitalist. Bourdieu's work can be read in the growing class-consciousness of the era and it is with that where we will shift to Habitus and related ideas before moving into the construction of the project itself.

(Slide 5) Habitus can best be described, I think, as the cultural language you are most fluent in. When I say "cultural language," I am talking about the specific codes, assumptions, affectations, accents, clothing, attitudes, language, values, and so on. These are summarized as social, cultural, economic, and educational CAPITAL and each area has a defined set of codes which identifies aspects about that person. (Slide 6) CAPITAL is what the individual carries into all other areas of life. Put another way, you can take the boy out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy. These aspects of the "cultural language" or CAPITAL signal to others where that individual fits within a group and within that group's rules or DOXA. (Slide 6) These groups are the FIELDS which an individual must find themselves based on what is available to them via these DOXA. (Slide 8) This all comes down to assumption based on how well the individual's CAPITAL and thus HABITUS aligns with the FIELD'S DOXA in order to indicate the success of that individual's PRACTICE. (Slide 9) Bourdieu illustrates this mechanism in *Distinction* with what he probably believes is a helpful equation. (Slide 10) This essentially posits that a person's habitus is defined by the ability to fit CAPITAL with FIELD via DOXA to equal a particular practice. (Slide 11)

Okay, this is all rather overstated, perhaps, and I think Habitus can be better explained (Slide 12), at least in part and in this context, as the ability to speak the correct “Cultural Language” for a given setting without intense cognition, training, or studied habituation, in other words the environment you are comfortable in because of your upbringing and the values, assumptions, and expectations that you share with those around you. This shared knowledge and the ability to speak this shared “cultural language” is what Bourdieu discusses as *Les Sens Pratique*, that is, the practical and at-hand knowledge of a field. This goes back to the article I mentioned a moment ago about Bourdieu’s interest in tennis. Bourdieu himself was from a working-class background, but as he rose through the ranks of academia and the bourgeois lifestyle he found a love for tennis. Because he was not brought up with this stereotypically upper-class sport, he needed to learn the language of the tennis court in both the rules within the game as well as the social rules that surrounded the game.

With that working knowledge of Habitus, I would like to pivot to now speaking about the project’s origins, methods, applying theory, and the problems, frustrations, and complications encountered so far.

The origins of this project stem not from experience in my current position at UMd, but from two previous positions going back about five years or so. These schools represent both a private boarding high school and a small, rural, liberal arts college. Each of these schools recruited from a different population in almost every category of socio-economic profile. This is not to say that the high school was entirely elite, or that the rural college was entirely made up of agricultural families, but there was an anecdotal, but noticeable difference between the two, in particular with regard to their college readiness in a couple of different forms.

It was during a faculty meeting at the liberal arts college where Habitus first occurred to me as an area of study within these groups. The college's retention numbers were sagging, and of particular interest to the college's administration was the issue of first-generation students and the higher than average rate at which they left the college. It was discussed during this meeting the idea that these students were perhaps not cut out for the rigors of college and for the course-load, etc. I, and many of the faculty present, found this insulting to the intelligence of these first generation students. There was no arguing with the data, however, there was a retention problem with this cohort.

When the college's president read aloud some of the information that these students provided as their reasons for leaving the college and where they went to instead, there was a discernable, but again, anecdotal trend. The examples he gave referred to students feeling like they did not fit in with the other students, that they felt inadequate and were unfamiliar with the expectations of college life. Additionally, the report told us that these students were leaving, at least in the few examples read to us, for community colleges. This information can be read, as the administration favored, that these students were going to community college as a way to ease into the college experience; and that is probably true, but, if we think about our ideas of Habitus here, we can possibly apply Bourdieu's thinking about this to see a potential conflict between student types.

(Slide 13) The types of students at odds here, I believe, are in essence much like Bourdieu's experience on the tennis court. On the one side of the net you have the college normative students, students for whom college was a foregone conclusion. These students were raised in a culture that valued, or at least expected the capital gained through college and whose parents most likely work and exist in a field with those same expectations. On the other side of

the net are the first-generation students for whom the field of college represents a different set of social and economic capital and cultural language. In one sense there could be a literal language difference in students from non-native English speaking families, but there is also the notion that there are a number of cultural or capital assumptions, that the college normative students will have learned through a combination of family conversation and school expectation. In other words, college normative students may simply be more familiar with the various terms we in education casually throw around from advisor, to student union, interlibrary loan etc. In fact I recently met with a small group of first generation transfer students. They had approached me to offer a short workshop for other transfer students and asked me to cover some of the library services they had recently learned about. They didn't know, for example, that our rooms were free to reserve. Additionally, they didn't know that librarians were able to help them do more than find books. This is not a fault, nor again am I looking to essentialize or patronize first-generation students, but these doxa, these unspoken yet critical elements make up the rules for successful practice and if first-generation students are missing elements of these doxa, it could contribute to some of the issues we see with retention. I was extremely pleased to work with these students so incredibly heartened to hear that they had figured out our complex system on their own. It took effort and initiative on their part, however, and demonstrated to me an area to expand our current offerings.

I am being purposely slippery here in using terms like, may or could, potentially, etc. I have not yet done this experiment with applied theory nor have I developed or sought out an appropriately multidimensional model for addressing the elements of successful practice. Partially this is due, as I have mentioned, to the worry surrounding the essentializing of a large group of students. There isn't one reason why students, of any background leave college, but I'm

interested to investigate if there are areas university departments, including the library, can work with students to teach them the cultural language to help them become more effortlessly fluent in a language their college normative peers may already speak.

This now brings us up to date. The I of the project that I've been using is now thankfully a we and I'd like to give a short update as to where we now stand with this project. As I've explained, Habitus is complex and throughout Bourdieu's work, it had changed and evolved somewhat. Additionally, like many theory-based frameworks, the interpretations of later researchers has continued to define and redefine what Habitus means today. At the beginning of the paper I mentioned a recent study of utilizing Habitus and I disparagingly said that the researchers emphasized the corrective elements of the theory. Many studies looking at Habitus fall into this trap somewhat and it is an easy one to fall into. There is a behavior that we, as librarians, are hoping to teach. There is a risk of imparting a morally didactic and overly corrective model when working with the potentially competing cultural language and successful practice. While as researchers we don't think negatively about the backgrounds of the first generation students, we are working to correct or at least norm their expectations. Where this other study was seeking something of a savior-model and seeking to pull students out of a situation; something of liberation-education model, we are looking to help students make up a few gaps. As seen with the UMd first generation transfer students I mentioned, there are not meek or helpless students, nor are they in any way incapable of the same academic success as their college normative peers. It is our hope, then, to help alleviate some of the cognitive load that having to live through translation creates.

In the next phase of our research, we have reached out to two offices working with first generation students: the transfer student office and the academic support office. Both of these

campus groups help with student matriculation, college readiness, and retention for first generation students. In our initial conversations with these offices we have received very positive feedback about our aims and the administrators are working with us to find time and space for our intervention. As I mentioned at the beginning a whole lifetime ago, it is our goal to use Habitus as a framework for approaching this intervention, but not our goal to use Habitus in the same way a sociologist or an education researcher would. This gives us a little bit of an out. We want to have a positive impact on the students, but proving any change as a causal result of an intervention is extraordinarily difficult. As such, we are looking to create a live-model for our intervention thereby allowing the students to tell us and work with us on what they really need. We will be giving a pre and posttest assessment in order to gauge their familiarity and any change that we can record, but ultimately it is the results of our minute-paper reflection assignment that we will be paying closer attention to. Because we are not looking for the students to parrot-back simple instructions, but indicate an understanding, we will be scoring these minute papers using a rubric intended to help us understand their use of academic language in a context that demonstrates understanding. The focus of our sessions will include the sort of standard library run-down of services, but our linguistic focus will be on teaching the language that will help in their understanding of our institutional field and the necessary *Les Sens Pratique*.

(Slide) Thank you very much