

# Depicting Bourdieu's Concepts as a Set of Stackable and Transparent Lenses

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## Abstract

Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of capital, field and habitus were originally used to understand inequalities in education in the 1970's. Today they are readily applied in other disciplines and contexts. This paper firstly explores the author's understanding of the concepts of capital, field and habitus as a depiction as a set of lenses, and suggests the application of this framework to further understand the experiences and trajectories of pre-registration nursing students to contribute to improvements in policy and service provision.

## INTRODUCTION

Post-structuralist Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Practice (1977) was originally used to understand inequalities in education in the 1970's. Today his concepts of capital, field and habitus are readily applied in other disciplines and contexts. Over the years, I have turned to Bourdieu's (1977) Theory of Practice to help understand people and their experiences across several research projects. As an avid hobbyist photographer, I have often thought about these concepts collectively as though I was looking through a set of stackable and transparent lenses.

This paper will firstly explore and explain Bourdieu's Theory of Practice, then present my depiction, and finally present my future aspirations to apply this framework to understand the trajectories of pre-registration nursing students.

## EXPLORING AND EXPLAINING BOURDIEU'S THEORY OF PRACTICE

Bourdieu's (1977) Theory of Practice uses the concepts of capital (cultural, economic and social), field and habitus to understand resources and dispositions in society. Originally, they were used to understand French education practices in the 1900's (Roth, 2018). Today they are utilized to explain power, control and inequality in a range of

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disciplines (Reay, 1998). According to Bourdieu (1977) resources such as money (economic), knowledge (cultural) and friendships (social) are known as capital.

According to Bourdieu (1977) fields are the interrelated spaces people move in within society such as education and work. Within the fields are the written and unwritten rules known as doxa. Inequality is noticeable in these spaces as people (agents) compete for resources. Some fields are stable, others taken more of a hybrid setting such as the changing space of higher education where sometimes the field is the physical university campus setting and other times it is the online space (Aitken et al., 2019).

Within the traditionally upper to middle classed practice of higher education inequality is often visible (Davey, 2009; Reay et al., 2001) since widening participation efforts has enabled participation from students from a variety of backgrounds (Black, 2022). This has prompted an interest in using the concepts of Bourdieu to understand the trajectories of such students. For example, O'Shea (2016) utilized capital to understand the experiences of first in family higher education students, and found that transformation is possible as students adjust and use resources (capital) to fit in.

Habitus is the inner mannerisms and attitudes which are instilled and influenced by classed practices during childhood (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Habitus poses a problem for researchers as it is very difficult to observe what occurs at an internalized level (Davey, 2009; Reay, 2004).

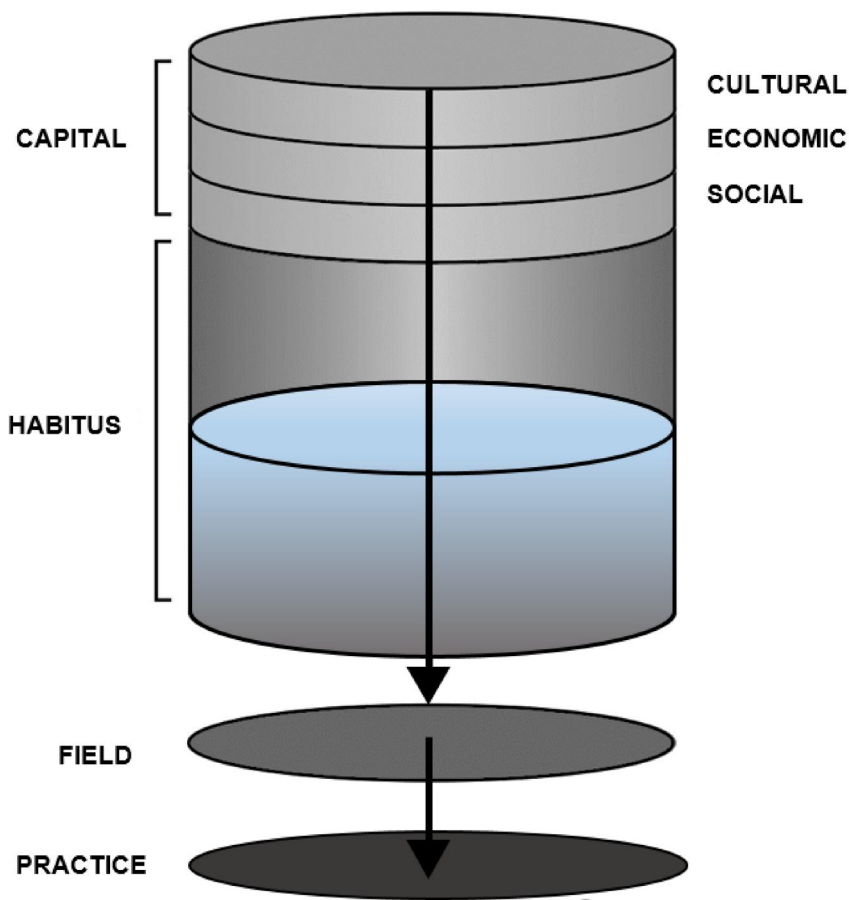
Within the literature there have been ways of thinking about the connection of these concepts to assist with application. For example, Bourdieu (1984) himself explained his concepts as a mathematical equation: "[ (Habitus) (Capital) ] + Field = Practice" (p.101). Writing in 2004, Reay further explains this relationship between the concepts: "habitus lies beneath cultural capital generating its myriad manifestations. There is a similarly close dynamic between habitus and field" (pp. 435–436). Bourdieu's and Reay's explanation of the concepts of capital, field and habitus in this way, inspired the approach I have taken in my research (Lewer, 2023a, 2023b) and inspired me to create a depiction of these concepts as a set of stackable and transparent lenses, as outlined below.

## A SET OF STACKABLE AND TRANSPARENT LENSES

Theoretical concepts as visual diagrams can assist with understanding and application (Mayer, 2009). Many scholars have attempted to understand Bourdieu's concepts visually through mind maps (Turnbull et al., 2019) and graphs (Wien & Dorch, 2018). This following three-dimensional depiction (Figure 1) was inspired by my passion as an avid hobbyist photographer. It is my understanding that the combination of capital and habitus allows for a more in-depth understanding of a field- the inequality that exists and the movements of people in relation to their motivations, needs and resources. Furthermore, by applying my depiction as a tool in which to design research and analyze data further insights could point to gaps in service and policy provision. Thinking about interactions within society in this way, researchers can underpin the entire project with this theory. From research design, to interview questions, to analysis of the data- by unpicking the qualitative data and looking for evidence of capital and habitus and the influence of the field.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING THE TRAJECTORIES AND EXPERIENCES OF PRE-REGISTRATION NURSING STUDENTS

My use of Bourdieu's concepts has largely been focused on understanding experiences within the higher education setting, and organizational change, however, my attention has turned to the possibilities of using these concepts to understand trajectories within nursing, and in particular the motivations and experiences of pre-registration nursing students within higher education. There are many scholars who have sought to understand the experiences of nursing within healthcare and have framed their research with Bourdieu's concepts to understand role development



**FIGURE 1** Lewer's depiction of Bourdieu's concepts of capital, field and habitus. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jobs.12436)]

(Blanco-Fraile et al., 2022), communication (Sieger et al., 2012) and culture (Moller, 2013) of nurses. Souza and Silvino (2018) clearly articulates the possibilities that Bourdieu's Theory of Practice offers to understanding nurses:

In the subfield of nursing, there can be several grasps of Bourdieu's sociology concepts, given the large dimension involving nurses' actions (agents), whether care, teaching, direction of health institutions, research, consulting or political nature, among others. On the other hand, nurses establish interaction within the nursing team, other health professionals, or professionals from human and organizational sciences.

(p. 2056)

Few scholars, however, have extended this application specifically to nursing education within the higher education setting despite an existing and established body of knowledge that uses Bourdieu's concepts is a helpful approach to understand the trajectories of other higher education students. With recent widening of participation at universities, many scholars who have sought to understand the experiences of a variety of cohorts such as first in family, women, and those who have experienced domestic violence have framed their research with the concepts of Bourdieu. As traditionally nursing was a vocational program (McMillan & Dwyer, 1989), and in many countries the transition to higher education is still occurring, understanding this cohort through a Bourdesian lens would be

useful in exploring the tensions between structure and agency in relation to their wellbeing, retention and experience of the university setting and clinical placements. Furthermore, by applying my depiction as a tool in which to design research and analyze data further insights could be achieved in relation understanding the resources this cohort of students have, and need, bringing insight into gaps in service and policy provision.

One particular cohort is the Australian Pre-Registration Nursing Student cohort studying Bachelor of Nursing at university. In Australia, historically nursing qualifications were gained via hospital-based training, however since the mid 1980's it has been a requirement to obtain a university degree to become a Registered Nurse (McMillan & Dwyer, 1989). Whilst this cohort of nursing students have been the focus of recent scholarly attention (Crawford et al., 2020), there is scant evidence that a Bourdieusian theoretical lens has been applied to understand their trajectories. The university environment is considered the field, and as Bathmaker (2015) describes it can be somewhat a game: "Field for Bourdieu is a field of contestation, involving struggle or tension, and "market" and "game" are often used as analogies or metaphors by Bourdieu and by researchers drawing on his work to explain the workings of field." (p. 66). By looking through this lens and planning interview questions with these concepts in mind whilst considering the traditions and histories of the nursing, further insight into how students experience the higher education setting would be gained, including what resources they bring with them, how they network with each other. In addition, a more detailed understanding would be gained in relation to the other fields in which such students move in such as juggling shift work on clinical placement, with family life and university study, and how these competing demands differs to other higher education students.

## CONCLUSION

Understanding theoretical concepts as visual diagrams can assist with understanding and application. By depicting Bourdieu's concepts as a series of lenses assists with deeper understanding of habitus which is hard to observe in isolation. Bourdieu's concepts were traditionally used to understand educational dispositions, but scholars have since found the concepts helpful to several disciplines. Nursing has benefited from these concepts with scholars addressing many niche topics to understand experience, and inequality within healthcare and nursing education. Further application of these concepts will assist with service and policy improvement, particularly for undergraduate nursing students.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Open access publishing facilitated by University of Wollongong, as part of the Wiley - University of Wollongong agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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**How to cite this article:** Lewer, K. (2023) Depicting Bourdieu's concepts as a set of stackable and transparent lenses. *Sociology Lens*, 36(4), 469–473. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12436>