

Habitus: A Tool of Gender Analysis

Manjeet Bhatia

Women's Studies and Development Centre (WSDC), University of Delhi

Email: manjeetb1@hotmail.com

Gender is subtle part of day to day living. It is socially constructed very early in life and it comes to stay for rest of the life. Can we deconstruct such learning is the question? We use the insights offered by the P. Bourdieu's theory of practice of which concept of habitus is an important part.

Let us first understand the notion of practice and habitus as given by Bourdieu. Earlier, it had appeared in the works of 'Hegel, Husserl, Weber, Durkheim and Muss' (P. Bourdieu, 1990). It is 'an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to a particular condition in which it is constituted' (P. Bourdieu, 1977)ⁱⁱ. For Instance, practical taxonomies-up/down, hot/cold etc.

Bourdieu retains the original meaning of the concept and sees it mainly as relationship between body and the habitus. The dispositions and the generative classificatory schemes are the essence of the habitus which are embodied in the real human being. Richard Jenkins (2003ⁱⁱⁱ), tells us that this embodiment appears to have three meanings in Bourdieu's works.

1. Habitus exists only in the head of the actor
2. It exists only in and because of practice by the actors, in their interaction with each other and with the environment at large.
3. Practical taxonomies which are at the heart of the generative schemes of habitus, are rooted in body. Up/down, hot/cold, male /female, front/back are sensible only in the bodily experiences of an actor.

Embodiment of habitus finds another expression in Bourdieu's works- 'hexis'- a Greek word not different from Latin habitus. Bourdieu uses it in the sense of deportment, the manner and style the way actors carry themselves- stance, gait, gesture etc. It is in the bodily hexis that personal

combines with the systemic social. It is the mediating link between the subjective worlds with the cultural world that the actors share.

Bodily hexis...is turned in to permanent dispositions, a durable manner of standing, speaking and thereby of feeling and thinking... The principles embodied in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness, and hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformations, cannot even be made explicit...^{iv}

Bourdieu uses the example of etiquette of men and women in Kabylia: the politics of gender shape and are revealed in ways of walking, looking and even standing still. The female ideal of modesty and restraint orients her down, towards the ground; the ideal men, however, moves upwards and outwards in his hexis. For Bourdieu, the body is a mnemonic device upon and in which the very basic of culture, the practical taxonomies of the habitus are imprinted and encoding socializing or learning process which commences in early childhood. The difference between socializing and learning is important. The habitus is inculcated mostly by experience and not so much by formal teaching.

The power of the habitus lies in the fact that it drives from thoughtlessness of habit or habituation rather than consciously learned rules and principles. Socially right performances are produced as a matter of routine without reference to any codified body of knowledge and without necessarily in the knowledge of the actor as to what s/he is doing, (in the sense of being able to adequately explain what s/he was doing).

Important question that becomes obvious is, what is the status of dispositions with respect to conscious and unconscious state of mind. Bourdieu is emphatic about the unconscious character of the practical logic and existence of dispositions beyond consciousness. Whereas Jenkins argues that it is equally clear that consciousness must be involved- speech, for instance does involve full range of mental/intellectual operations, both conscious and unconscious. Bourdieu seems to accept it:

Each agent, *willing or unwillingly*, willynilly, is producer and reproducer of objective meaning...It is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do *has more meaning than they know*^v.

Jenkins tell us, it is difficult to know where to place role of conscious deliberations in Bourdieu's

Scheme of things. Yet the more pertinent issue is not that Bourdieu denies the role of calculative.Rationality as asocial phenomenon, but his disbelief in its relevance:

The lines of action suggested by habitus may very well be accompanied by a strategic calculation of costs and benefits which tends to carry out at a conscious level the operations which habitus carries out in its own way...Times of crises, in which the routine adjustment of subjective objective structures is brutally disrupted, constitutes a class of circumstances when indeed 'rational choice' often appears to take over. But and this is a crucial proviso, it is habitus itself that commands this option. We can always say that individuals make choices, as long as we do not forget that they do not choose the principals of these choices.^{vi}

Thus according to Bourdieu , decision making on face value appear either a) a shadow of what habitus is doing in any case, either beforehand or simultaneously ,b) an option that under certain circumstances , is part of the repertoire of the habitus, not in any way, an autonomous or chosen process, c)an illusion, in so far as they are driven and constraint by habitus. In short, it is the less than conscious dispositions of the habitus that produce practices.

Dispositions, Bourdieu tells us, that make habitus are the 'generative basis 'of practices.

Jenkins interprets the words used by Bourdieu, that suggests causal link between habitus and practices. This process is neither mechanical nor deterministic. The habitus disposes actors to do certain things, it provides basis for generation of practice. Practices are produced by twin activities: by the encounter between the habitus and its dispositions on the one hand and constraints, opportunities, demands by the social field, market to which the habitus adjusts and in which actor moves, on the other^{vii}. This is achieved by less than conscious process of habitus and practices of the actor to the objective and external constraints of the social world.

Transposable quality of disposition

The dispositions appropriate to one field are translated to the logic of another field^{viii}. This is how diverse social settings and practices exhibit coherence or thematic unity. This comes close to Weber's 'elective affinity' in the lives of embodied agents and in the live-styles of collectivities. The habitus continuously generates practical metaphors...systemic transpositionsrequired by the particular conditions in which the habitus is 'put into practice' ... The practice of the same agent, and, more generally, the practice of all agents of the same class,

owe the stylistic affinity which makes each of them a metaphor of any of the others to the fact that they are the product of transfers of the same schemes of action from one field to another.^{ix}

Bourdieu's concept of 'transposition' and the notion of 'transformation' in Le'vi-Straussian structural analysis comes close here. It also comes close to Chomsky's generative model of language use, particularly his theory of transformational grammar. Bourdieu's dispositions are acquired through social experience, whereas the elements and components of Chomsky's model are presumed to be the product of human neuro-physiology (and this in a sense Chomsky meets Le'vi-Strauss). Further Chomsky's model offers a speculative mechanism, linking deep linguistic structures and speech practices. In the case of Bourdieu, it is not clear how dispositions produce practices.

Durability

Another characteristic of dispositions is that they are durable. It links to their foundation by learning in the early years of once life, of their habitual, unreflexive nature, of their adjustment to the objective condition of their existence and their inscription on the bodily hexis. This process of formation of dispositions makes the habitus almost immune to any major upset. Once acquired it underlies and conditions all subsequent learning and social experience.

Structural Functionalism

Jenkins tells us that Bourdieu's description of how habitus works comes close to structural functionalism of Talcott Parsons according to whom social stability is result of shared values, beliefs and norms. Here, the functions of an action are read from the outcome of the action.

There are others too who have identified functionalism as one of the threads of Bourdieu's theoretical network. Elster, for instance, has also said the same and also pointed out that there is no causal linkage between habitus and actor's actions.^x Functionalism and absence of causal linkage are related are related comments. Social change in functionalism can at best be related to external factors alone. Given the connection between subjectivities of the habitus and the objectivity of the social world, a close loop between the two is obvious that confirms each other.

Yet it is not clear how does this model works? Subjective expectation of objective probabilities is a passive representation of the cognitive process and practice, in which nature of habitus is known through outcome of action. Questions it raises are how does one know the objective

probability if not through conscious acts? Why the 'why things are' cannot be questioned by the actor? How can an expectation be other than conscious? Jenkins rightly points that this formulation at best, is *vague* and at worst an act of *faith*.

Is it Deterministic?

Habitus thus is source of objective practice, but itself is a set of subjective generative principles produced by the objective patterns of social life. Jenkins (1992), tell us that such a model is either determinism or sophisticated functionalism. It is difficult to imagine how in Bourdieu's tapestry; the meaningful practices are created in social contexts. Jenkins (1992), tells us that one can only speculate how the objective structures are constituted or modified in that practice. Objective structures are somehow given as 'cultural arbitraries', which the action of an embodied agent reproduces.

Bourdieu responds in the following ways: 1) habitus operates only in relation to social field. Depending upon what is going in the field the same habitus can produce different practice. 2) Habitus can modify according to changed circumstances. Aspirations and expectations would change accordingly. 3) habitus can be controlled as a result of 'awakening of consciousness and socio-analysis'. Jenkins observes that both first two explanations do not offer any defense to the allegation as they are dependent upon the external circumstances. Whereas, the third point he does not understand. I think the third point expects double deduction to discover witnessing self that makes the actor conscious of factors commanding her/his behaviour/practice. Thus, actors can intervene in their own history and modify it. Though, practically it may not be that easy in day to day practice.

According to Bourdieu practice does not follow any rules, instead, actors' strategies. Strategies are an important link between the notion of practice, habitus and field. Socially, strategy is ongoing result of interaction between dispositions of habitus and constraints, opportunities that are reality of social field- that could be anything from college election, cultural consumption to politics.

According to Bourdieu strategies are neither conscious acts nor are unconscious programs. They are recognisable through the patterns of outcomes of practice. They must exist for the purpose of explanation of practice. In Bourdieu's own expression, instead of model of reality, he is giving reality of model.

Field

Felid or social field in which habitus operates needs to be defined.

Bourdieu ...defines a field as a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their ...situation...in the structure of distribution of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions...^{xi}

A field thus is a structured system of social positions that is occupied by individuals or institutions. Nature of position is defined by the situation of the occupants. It is also a system of forces between these positions. A field is internally structured by power relations. Power comes from the access of occupants to resources, (capital), that is at stake in the field. Positions, thus, stand in relationship of domination, subordination or that of equivalence to each other by virtue of resources that it controls. These resources (goods) can be differentiated into four categories:

- Economic capital
- Social capital (various kinds of valued relations with significant others)
- Cultural capital (legitimate knowledge of one kind or the other)
- Symbolic capital (prestige and social honour, legitimacy, recognition)

The nature of positions, their 'objective definition', is defined by their relationship to the relevant form of capital.

Symbolic Violence

Symbolic violence, according to Bourdieu is the imposition of systems of symbolism and meaning (culture) upon groups and classes, in such a way that they are experienced as legitimate. Legitimacy hoodwinks power relations that allows the imposition to succeed. In so far it is accepted as legitimate, culture throws its own weight behind the power relations, thus, adding to their systemic reproduction.

Culture is arbitrary in content and in its imposition.

Gender and Habitus

‘Being included, as man or woman, in the object that we are trying to comprehend, we have embodied the historical structures of masculine order in the form of unconscious schemes of perceptions and appreciation.’^{xii}

The embodiment of domination

The paradox according to Bourdieu is

...it is the visible difference between the female body and the male body which, being perceived and constructed according to the practical schemes of the androcentric worldview, become the most perfectly indisputable guarantee of meanings and values that are in harmony with the principles of the worldview...it is the worldview which, being organized according to the division into *relational genders*, male and female, can institute the phallus, constituted as symbol of virility,...and between biological bodies as objective foundations of difference between the sexes, in the sense of genders constructed as two hierarchized social essences.^{xiii}

Such construction is farfetched from necessities of biological reproduction determining the division of sexual labour that ultimately determining natural and social order. ‘It is arbitrary construction of male and female body,’ that ‘gives ...natural foundation to the androcentric view of division of sexual labour and so of the whole cosmos.’ It brings together two operations: ‘*it legitimates a relationship of domination by embedding it in biological nature that itself a naturalized social construction.*’^{xiv}

The passion of the dominated habitus, (dominated by either gender, ethnicity, language, culture or language)-giving rise to physical symptoms in social relationships due to psychological distress are converted in to the embodied laws that 'cannot be suspended by simple effort of will'^{xv}. Will that is based on 'libratory awaking of consciousness.' This embodied law is that durable because its effects and conditions of its effectiveness are deeply embedded in the body in the form of dispositions.

Bourdieu tells us that these dispositions particularly are seen in the kinship and allied relationships. In such relationship, socialized body's inclination is felt in the logic of feelings(love) or duty which are merged in the feelings of respect and devotion and may live long after when the social conditions of its production have ceased to exist.

To point to the marks that domination durably imprints in bodies and the effects it exerts through them does not mean that one is offering support to that particularly vicious way of ratifying domination which consists in making women responsible for their own domination by suggesting, as peoplesometimes do, that they *choose* to adopt submissive practices, ('women are their own worst enemies') or even that they love their own domination, that they 'enjoy' the treatment inflicted of them, in a kind of masochism inherent in their nature.

It has to be acknowledged both that the 'submissive' disposition that are sometimes used to 'blame the victim' are the product of the objective structures, and also that these structures only drive their efficacy from the dispositions which they trigger and which help to reproduce them.^{xvi}

Symbolic power (here, Androcentric world view), is effective only if the dominated participates in this practical act. Such power is also exercised because those who undergo it 'construct it as such.' Bourdieu goes beyond such understandingto analyse how are the cognitiveapparatus socially constructed that organize acts of construction of the world and its powers. Such an act, thus, is not act of free will of an agent/subject. This practical construction is 'itself the effect of power', that lastingly is deposited in the bodies of the dominated, 'in the form of schemes of perception and dispositions' that informs them of certain 'symbolic manifestation of power.'

Gender, with established asymmetry of power is thus embodied in the cognitive apparatus itself that formulates the worldview. Dispositions of love and respect, for instance, thus are not deliberate, well informed acts. They are rather inbuilt in the form of schemes of perception and dispositions of the body and are unconscious acts. That is the reason, it is easy for the female subordinates to address *sir* to a male senior than *madam* to a senior lady for a female employee.

In the world dominated by androcentric world view female are configured with dominated perception as male with the dominant.

Question is, will it be possible to change these embodied schemes of perception and dispositions to strike a balance of power between two genders?

If habitus is not deterministic, as claimed by Bourdieu, can it can be changed or transformed?

Bourdieu is of the view that symbolic revolution desired by feminist movements through consciousness raising would never be able to deliver the results because, according to Bourdieu's concept of habitus, the foundation of this symbolic violence does not lie in the mystified

consciousness that only needs to be enlightened. It rather lay in the dispositions that are attuned to structures of domination of which they are the product. The relation of complicity that the victim allows to the dominant can only be changed by 'a radical transformation of the social conditions of production of the dispositions'^{xvii} that direct the dominated to take the dominant point of view on the dominated and the dominant.

Summary of conclusion:

1. Habitus is only in the mind of the actor.
2. Habitus is responsible for the unconscious action of bodily dispositions and objective social world.
3. Symbolic power has inbuilt androcentric world view which is effective only if dominated participates in the practical act. Such an act is not out of free will of an agent/subject.
4. The Practical construction is 'itself the effect of power', that is lastingly deposited in the body of the dominated, 'in the form of schemes of perception and depositions' that enforce the 'symbolic manifestation of power'.
5. Symbolic revolution desired by the feminist through raising conscious is unlikely to succeed. As the foundation of this symbolic violence does not lie in the mystified consciousness. It can be changed only by 'a radical transformation of the social conditions of production of dispositions' that direct that dominated to take the dominant point of view on both the dominated and dominated.

ⁱP. Bourdieu, *In Other Word: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, Cambridge, Polity (1990), p. 12)

ⁱⁱ P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of practice*, Cambridge, Cambridge Unoversity Press, 1977, p. 95

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu*, Routledge, London, 1992 Simultaneously published in New York and Canada by Routledge

^{iv} P, Bourdieu, *OutlineoOf a Theory of Practice*, op. cit. pp.93-94.

^v P. Bourdieu, *Ibid.* p. 73. As referred by Richard Jenkins

^{vi} L.D. Wacquant, 'Towards a Reflexive Sociology: A workshop with Pierre Bourdieu'. *Sociological Theory*, vol.7(1989 p.45

^{vii} P. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Cambridge, Polity, 1990. pp52-65.

^{lii}P. Bourdieu,*Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. J. B. Thompson, Cambridge, Polity, 1991, pp.37-42

^{ix} P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the judgment of Taste*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul (1984), p.172-

^x J. Elster, *Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of rationality*, Cambridge University Press (1983), pp.69-71,101--8

^{xi} L.D. Wacquant, 'Towards a Reflexive Sociology: A workshop with Pierre Bourdieu'*Sociological Theory*, p. 37-41.

^{xii} P.Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, first published by polity press in 2001 (first published in France as *La domination masculine*, C Editions du Seuil, 1998), p. 5.

^{xiii} *Ibid*, pp22-23.

^{xiv} *Ibid*.

^{xv} *ibid*.p.39

^{xvi} *ibid*.p.40

^{xvii} *ibid*.p.42