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Habitus, Symbolic Violence, and Reflexivity: Applying Bourdieu's Theories to Social Work

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During the mid- to late-twentieth century, Pierre Bourdieu created a conceptual framework that describes how underclass status becomes embodied in individuals, and the ways that personal, professional, and political fields perpetuate this oppression. Bourdieu's theories also outline the role of the "critical intellectual" in undermining oppression and fighting for social justice. Using key terms from Bourdieu's explanatory framework, this article examines the power relations and symbolic violence built into the interactions between social workers and clients, and offers suggestions as to how reflexive and relational social work can help workers reduce this impact. This paper also explores the role of social workers in addressing social inequalities by examining Bourdieu's writings in terms of macro approaches to disparity.

Key words: Bourdieu, habitus, power, reflexivity, social work, symbolic violence

Pierre Bourdieu's Theoretical Contribution

Field and Capital

According to Pierre Bourdieu, the arenas, networks, and social spaces where individuals live define their social lives (Eagleton & Bourdieu, 1992; Waquant, 2008). Otherwise known as *fields*, Bourdieu described these social spaces in language similar to that of a war or game, with "battlegrounds," "stakes," "rules of the game," "power relations," "common interests," and

“trump cards” (Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu & Waquant, 1992; Eagleton & Bourdieu, 1992). In addition, *fields* have recognizable boundaries—for example, the professional (various professions), personal (families, social networks, residence), and political (administrative institutions, political agencies). Some of the more common fields found in Bourdieu’s work include the cultural, economic, intellectual, bureaucratic, and power fields. In addition, fields also include sub-fields. For example, the intellectual field may include the sub-fields of arts and social sciences; or in the case of the bureaucratic field, sub-fields may include the welfare and penal “arms” of the state (Waquant, 2010).

The “stakes” “power relations” and “common interests” inherent within *fields* revolve around Bourdieu’s notion of *capital*. As described by Bourdieu, *capital* is any resource in a social arena that enables an individual to benefit from participation (Bourdieu, 1979/1980, 1986; Waquant, 2008). *Capital* comes in three major forms: economic (material and financial assets), cultural (education, accent, clothing, behavior, and objects such as books and art), and social (networks with well-placed individuals) (Bourdieu, 1979/1980, 1986, 1989). As defined by Bourdieu (1992), *symbolic capital* is best understood as a trait of favorability, held by any of the three primary forms when they are recognized by the majority or by individuals in power as legitimate. Bourdieu’s theory also contends that there is always competition for capital because it can only have value when it is scarce and unevenly distributed. Thus, competition is an essential component of capital, and exists within fields and between them—individuals are in a constant struggle to assert particular forms of capital, gain access to and control them, and to devalue other forms of capital (Bourdieu & Waquant, 1992).

Habitus, Embodiment, and Doxa

With his concept of *habitus*, Bourdieu developed an analysis describing the interplay between society, status, and the body (Ignatow, 2009). According to Bourdieu’s theory, an individual’s *habitus* is comprised of the unconscious schemata, acquired through perpetual exposure to social conditioning, through which we perceive, judge, and act in the world (Bourdieu, 1972/1977; Waquant, 2008). *Schemata*, a term developed by

Jean Piaget in the mid-1920s, describes the structures by which individuals' thoughts are organized. According to Piaget's theory (2006), through the use of schemata, most new situations do not require conscious processing. Instead, people organize new experiences within their mind's organizational structure. Similarly, Bourdieu's definition of habitus represents an instinctual understanding of new events based on previous experience.

Bourdieu describes the embodiment of these understandings insofar as an individual's response to the world may be physical as well as mental. Individuals do not simply believe or think within certain structural boundaries—they "feel" confined by them, and are incapable of thinking outside them (Bourdieu, 1972/1977). As the common point of contact between past influences and present experiences, habitus is at once structured—by the social forces that produced it—and structuring; it gives form and coherence to new experiences (Bourdieu, 1972/1977, 1989; Waquant, 2008). Bourdieu also theorized that while the habitus is capable of adapting to new stimuli, it is also extremely stable, with a fixed tendency to act within preexisting limits and toward specific responses (Grenfell, 2004).

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

Symbolic Violence

Following from the conceptualization of doxa is the idea of symbolic violence, which exists when doxa produces or sustains an unequal distribution of capital (Everett, 2002). By adopting the status quo as obvious and appropriate, even when it is hurtful to them, individuals position themselves within the structure of society, further legitimizing and solidifying it (Bourdieu & Waquant, 1992; Eagleton & Bourdieu, 1992; Waquant, 2008). Furthermore, having accepted as legitimate the established (inequitable) social order and their position within it, individuals who are powerless and dominated believe the doxa which attributes blame to themselves for their subordinate position (Bourgois, 2001; Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009). In effect, individuals within the underclass come to believe that they deserve their status. Thus, the “violence” within symbolic violence refers to the physical domination that is replaced or made purposeless because the individual sees the existing social order as natural and appropriate (Everett, 2002; Lane, 2000). According to Bourdieu, these actions upon the self make the domination under which they suffer more difficult than ever to challenge:

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

Reflexivity

In an interesting departure from most theorists, Bourdieu included social scientists within the framework of his theories through a conceptualization of *reflexivity*. Bourdieu's concept of reflexivity rests on the idea that it is impossible for the social scientist to be fully objective because he is an individual who exists within various fields in society, holds certain forms of capital, and whose habitus includes certain doxic notions (Bourdieu, 1980/1990; Bourdieu & Waquant, 1992). Thus, reflexivity

refers to the need for the social scientist to continually “turn the instruments of social science back” (Waquant, 2008, p. 273) upon him or herself in order to reduce distortions that may be introduced by the scientist’s personal experience:

What distresses me when I read some works by sociologists is that people whose profession it is to objectivize the social world prove so rarely able to objectivize themselves, and fail so often to realize that what their apparently scientific discourse talks about is not the object, but their relation to the object. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 68–69)

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

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

Bourdieu believed that this mission was essential, and in *Weight of the World* (Bourdieu et al., 1993/2000), he organized the research of more than twenty sociologists to demonstrate how such a process could be conducted. Specifically, Bourdieu and his colleagues produced detailed ethnographies exploring in great depth the experiences of individual suffering throughout the world. In summarizing this process, Bourdieu explained that by speaking with and relating to their subjects, he and the other researchers were able to transcend the intellectual doxa that had previously defined their experience, illuminating the real social problems that contributed to their misery, and countering the symbolic violence built into their experiences. For scientists interested in uncovering the truth, Bourdieu believed that such a role was not only beneficial, but was necessary to conducting meaningful social science.

Social Work's Position Within the Bureaucratic Field

Bourdieu's contention that fields occur in hierarchies directly applies to the field of social work, particularly its history of fighting for status as a respected profession. Since Abraham Flexner (1915) stated that social work was a non-profession, the field has been preoccupied with its status, working continuously to demonstrate its legitimacy as a profession commensurate with medicine or law. According to Morris (2008), these efforts by social workers to prove the field's status have resulted in some significant achievements, but have also come at a price. While social work has developed many of the attributes of professionalization (e.g., a systematic body of knowledge, standardized curriculum, professional associations), some authors have argued that social work has left behind the tradition of social reform and replaced "its humanistic foundations with scientific positivism" (Morris, 2008, p. 30). According to Reid & Edwards (2006), social work has turned increasingly towards a model where services are no longer provided by social workers themselves, but are contracted through nonprofit and for-profit agencies. In a fervent critique, Reamer (1993) argues that due to professionalization, the field of social work attracts fewer people drawn to a commitment to social justice and public welfare. This view is shared by Ferguson (2008), who argues that social

work's turn toward professionalism, managerialism, and evidence-based practice has resulted in a desertion of its original mission to promote social justice and to provide aid and comfort to the vulnerable, oppressed, and impoverished.

In their article reviewing social work fields in ten countries, Weiss-Gal & Welbourne (2008) distinguish between two approaches for determining professionalization: the attributes (or trait) approach and the power (or control) approach. As outlined above, the successes that have been made in distinguishing American social work as a profession fall under the attributes approach. Despite these successes, a number of authors have argued that social work continues to fall short of professional status, particularly because it lacks the ability to make decisions on the basis of its own professional knowledge and values, free of the restraints of managers or agencies outside the profession (Hugman, 1996). In Bourdieusian terms, the field of social work lies under the control of the state, which itself is not a single monolithic entity, but a collection of sub-fields "vying over the definition and distribution of public goods" (Waquant, 2010, p. 200). Within this collective, social work represents the "left hand of the state"—the "feminine" "spendthrift," in charge of "social functions" such as education, health, housing, welfare, and offering protection and relief to the poor. In contrast, the "right hand" or "masculine" side of the state is oriented toward economic discipline and law and order (Bourdieu, 1998/1998; Bourdieu & Waquant, 1993/1994).

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

Although increasingly accepted as rigorous, the social sciences continue to have a more ambiguous standing in political or popular consciousness compared to the natural science base of medicine, or the ancient traditions of the law. Social scientists may find themselves caught between their work being accepted, and so seen as merely common sense (what people

knew anyway), and not being accepted because it challenges preconceptions. (Hugman, 1996, pp. 133–134)

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

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

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

Power and Symbolic Violence

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

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

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

[w]elfare agencies and welfare clients belong to a structure of domination, but one which is largely misrecognized. Bourdieu's notion of 'misrecognition' simply indicates, in this context, that the relationship between administrative agencies and welfare recipients, which is organized in terms of control, is misrecognized as caring. Misrecognition is of course not accidental: it activates symbolic structures which are incorporated in the habitus and are likely to ensure compliance. (Peillon, 1998, p. 221)

Bourdieu (1979/1980) writes that the importance of symbolic power is in its ability to impose the principles of reality construction on others. As trusted members of society who encounter individuals at their most vulnerable and define this experience through written assessments, it is incumbent upon

social workers to consider the effects of social inequalities on their clients' habitus, the ways in which clients may have embodied their dominated social position, the shame and blame of that subjected position, and the potential of their own actions in reinforcing symbolic violence (Bourgois, 2001; Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009). Approaches that attempt to improve client functioning through threats, punitive practices, and shaming may not only miss the mark, but may also do harm.

Reflexivity and Self-Scrutiny

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

Social workers [must] analyze their taken for granted views ... before they intervene in clients' lives. Unless we reflect on our personal habitus and the professional field in which it is anchored, there is a danger of replicating biased notions that have been inculcated through professional training, managerial directives or experiences in embattled social work agencies. (p. 159)

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

The importance of asking these questions lies in the fact that the information and analyses arrived at by social workers occurs through an interpretive process, with tremendous consequences for their clients (White, 1997). As part of their work, social workers make judgments and put together arguments justifying their assessments. Importantly, however, "these judgments do not rely on formal knowledge alone, but on a range of other rationalities and warrants ... judgments about blameworthiness and creditworthiness, responsibility and irresponsibility" (Taylor & White, 2001, p. 47). Thus, the assessments and recommendations made by social workers are not simply the accumulation of objective knowledge, but a process of interpreting information:

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

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

Relational Analysis

In *The Weight of the World* (1993/2000), Bourdieu and colleagues demonstrate the practice of *relational analysis*, a practice developed and employed by the authors where they interacted with subjects on a personal level over prolonged periods, and related to them as individuals who were experts about their own experiences. Describing the approach, Bourdieu identified five strategies for ensuring the truth and thoroughness of interviews: (1) making the project's intentions, goals, and procedural principles explicit; (2) clarifying what subjects can and cannot say; (3) overcoming the limitations of documentation by taking into account body language, vocal stress, or irony; (4) making sure that interviewers had extensive knowledge of the social contexts of their subjects; and (5) ensuring through a process of self-reflexivity that interviewers objectified their social and professional contexts, and tried to distance themselves, as far as possible, from preconceived notions and values taken from their habitus and field (Schirato & Webb, 2003).

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

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

Furthermore, as argued earlier, Bourdieu harbored many doubts about the ability of social workers to remain autonomous

and to practice within the context of their own professional values, especially given the broader context of their position within the bureaucratic field.

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

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

In a similar fashion, Bourdieu argued that social scientists must keep in mind, first and foremost, that they are not researching "things" but "relations" that are continually changing and up to interpretation (Bourdieu, in Bourdieu et al., 1993/2000, p. 609). Furthermore, Bourdieu argued that social scientists must employ "active and methodical listening" as opposed to "half-understanding" based on a "distracted and routinized attention" (p. 614). Bourdieu suggested that through these processes, social scientists may "avoid the condescension and insensitivity characteristic of other interview situations," which does little more than offer a "projection of doxic belief" (Stabile & Morooka, 2003). Bourdieu believed that this practice of engaged listening was effective in suspending, if not completely

transcending, commonly held beliefs (doxa) that serve to perpetuate the symbolic violence experienced by social work clients (Stabile & Morooka, 2003). As such, Bourdieu believed that while relational analysis may at first seem subjective, when paired with reflexivity, it could in fact become a more effective means of arriving at truth.

Addressing Inequality

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

Citing Bourdieu and Waquant's (in Bourdieu et al., 1993/2000) depiction of American ghettos, often characterized by an absence of police, schools, health care institutions, and social service organizations, Garret (2007a) argues that social workers must also resist the push of neoliberalism and the retreat of the state in providing a social safety net for the poor. As Pileggi and Patton (2003) maintain, when working in a neoliberal context, "practitioners of a field become liable to two masters: the practices and norms of [their] discipline and the practices and norms of the market" (p. 318). In line with this, social workers must resist efforts to make social work more "managerial" and market-focused (Garrett, 2007a, 2007b), and to use social work as a means of controlling the poor (Bourdieu, in Bourdieu et al., 1993/2000). As such, Bourdieu's theories encourage social workers to employ a multi-level approach, addressing not only

individual factors but also the effect of structural forces on client circumstances.

Unanswered Questions

In Jeremy Lane's (2000) text, *Pierre Bourdieu: A Critical Introduction*, the author makes a salient point that Bourdieu's theories are elitist and deterministic, and that they insinuate that oppressed individuals do not have the proper reflexivity to liberate themselves. To what degree then, is it possible that by adopting Bourdieu's theoretical framework, social workers also introduce elitism and determinism into the habitus of their clients? If, as Bourdieu's theories postulate, reflexivity is exclusive to social scientists and sociologists, or barring that, those with the social and economic means to engage in such a practice, how do such claims feed into clients' feelings of hopelessness, dependency, or the notion that they are "objects" of welfare? Furthermore, where is there room within Bourdieu's theories for empowerment? A theory that focuses solely on the distinction between "victims" and "perpetrators," and which claims that a protest movement amongst the oppressed would be a "social miracle" (Bourdieu, 1998) does not hold much hope for self-liberation.

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

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

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

Finally, as pointed out by Sayer (2010), Bourdieu's theories do not leave room for social workers to engage with clients in terms of morality, responsibility, or concern for others. What does this mean for social workers that work with clients who have hurt others? Is there room within a Bourdieusian framework to approach clients in terms of personal responsibility, restorative justice, and compassion for those who have been hurt? Within the context of strategic moves within fields, how do social workers assist clients in setting things right?

Ways Forward

Bourdieu's theories call equally upon critical intellectuals to address inequality at the deeply personal level, undermining the doxa that defines client's habitus, while also using social capital to enact change at the mezzo and macro levels. The fact that Bourdieu and his colleagues (1993/2000) specifically identified social workers as not living up to this duty may indicate that the field has lost its way as the champion for the poor and oppressed.

As illustrated by Reisch and Andrews (2002), the field of social work has a long tradition of zealous progressivism spanning from the settlement houses in the early 20th century, through the Rank and File Movement of the 1930s, and culminating in the Radical Social Work Movement of the 1970s. These campaigns, headed primarily by social workers, were characterized not only by the direct help provided to clients, but also by their greater efforts toward equality, including labor activism, marches, boycotts, and strikes. In addition, The Rank

and File Movement and Radical Social Work Movement both challenged the professionalization of social work, believing that it undermined the relationship between social workers and clients. Instead, these movements encouraged closer relationships between social workers and clients, based on common class interests (Ferguson, 2008).

Despite this tradition, Ferguson (2008) and others (Garrett 2007a, 2007b; Waquant, 2010) argue that social work has become increasingly conservative, characterized by:

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

In his book, *Reclaiming Social Work*, Ferguson (2008) also makes the point that recent trends toward managerialism have left many social workers alienated, despondent, and estranged from the profession. If social work is to reclaim its identity as a compassionate profession, committed to and aligned with the interests of the underclass, it is necessary for it to return to its progressive roots and challenge the social structures that undermine social justice. According to Ferguson, this is a direction that is not only necessary for the well-being of social work clients, but also for social workers to be happy and fulfilled in their work.

For some, however, a command toward structural activism may be overwhelming. Are all social workers responsible for macro-level social work? What about clients? How do they fit within this macro-level activity? Despite his rhetorical focus on neoliberalism in *Acts of Resistance* (1998/1998), Bourdieu's writings also demonstrate that he saw the value of small battles oriented toward larger social goals. In one example, Bourdieu describes efforts by French welfare ministries to protect social housing policy:

For example, within the French bureaucracy, when housing finance was being reformed, the welfare ministries fought against the financial ministries to defend the social housing policy. Those civil servants had an interest in defending

their ministries and their positions; but they also believed in what they were doing, they were defending their convictions. (Bourdieu, 1998/1998, p. 33)

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

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

Finally, social workers should use their trade unions (Service Employees International Union [SEIU], for example) and professional organizations (National Association of Social Workers [NASW]) to continually advocate on behalf of social work clients. During the Occupy Wall Street Movement of 2011, both the SEIU and the NASW were galvanized in the national effort to protest cuts to essential social services among the poor and middle class. While inspiring at the time, efforts among conservatives to curtail basic social services began before the Occupy Movement, and continued after. As such, social workers must push their representatives to remain vigilant and vocal on behalf of clients, even without a national movement to inspire them. At present, a number of nationally popular politicians are advocating for cuts to food stamps, Social Security, Medicaid, and other fundamental social safety net programs. On these issues and others like them, clients depend on the social capital, support, and

activism of social workers to prevent retrenchment and maintain a basic standard of living for the poor. Social workers must use their unions and national organizations to lobby Congress and to speak within governmental institutions on behalf of the poor. To the extent that representatives of the social work community are not doing this, it is the responsibility of every social worker to spur their affiliations to these causes.

While Bourdieu's theories may appear elitist, esoteric, or overly ambitious, they contain an explanatory framework with real world meaning for the field of social work. As argued by Lane (2000), Bourdieu's most important theoretical contribution is the connection he built between structuralism and existentialism through the conceptual use of habitus. This is also Bourdieu's most important contribution to social work. By illuminating the way that inequalities influence the self-perception (via symbolic violence), attitudes and behaviors of clients, Bourdieu signals to social workers that their work on behalf of clients must attend to inequality and structural barriers. In addition, as demonstrated by Peillon (1998), social workers must also be cognizant of their own habitus, using reflexivity to remain fair and earnest advocates for their clients. By applying these salient principles, social workers can become more effective and meaningful in their practice, but also more connected, fulfilled, and relevant.

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