Capital, Power, and Habitus: How Does Bourdieu Speak to the Tenure Process in Universities?

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ABSTRACT: This paper uses sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social structure (1986, 1990a, 1990b, 1991, 1995, 1998) to better understand the concept of tenure and the relationships that contribute to a conflicted experience for many. Social structures reproduce themselves according to the rules of the *field*, and various forms of social, cultural, and symbolic *capital*, underlined by economic capital, are traded by individuals who each have a sense of their value in the system, or *habitus*. Aspects of the tenure process reflect the rules of the field of academia, excluding those academics (Bonner, 2004; Connell & Savage, 2001). The process of tenure is subjective and can exclude those who are most worthy (Batterbury, 2008; Benton, 2007). A glut of professors can reinforce the status quo and challenge it (Bourdieu, 1988). Recommendations are made to improve the inherent biases and conflicts within the process.

RESUMÉ: Ce papier se sert de la théorie de la structure du monde social élaborée par le sociologue Pierre Bourdieu (1986, 1990a, 1990b, 1991, 1995, 1998) afin de mieux saisir le concept de titularisation et les liens qui contribuent, pour beaucoup, à une expérience conflictuelle. Les structures du monde social renvoient au concept du "champ"et les formes variées du "capital" social, culturel et symbolique, sous-entendant le capital économique, sont traitées par des individus qui comprennent chacun leur valeur dans le "système" ou "*habitus*." Les aspects de la méthode de titularisation reflètent les structures du "champ" du milieu universitaire, excluant les universitaires tels que; Bonner, 2004, Connell et Savage, 2001.La méthode de titularisation est subjective et peut exclure les universitaires qui sont fort remarquables comme Batterbury, 2008 et Benton, 2007. De nombreux professeurs peuvent renforcer le statu quo et relever le défi (Bourdieu, 1988). Des conseils pour changer les préjugés

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inhérents et améliorer les conflits à l'intérieur même de la méthode, sont donnés.

What is Tenure and What are Some Issues Related to It?

Tenure was originally intended to protect scholars' free thought and to provide stability to the university system (Sjoberg, 1998). Universal availability of tenure at all universities meant that professors everywhere, whether at large or small universities, could have a sense of stability (Sjoberg, 1998). They could follow their interests without fear for the outcome if those interests conflicted with those of the university's administration or student body. Tenure also benefits the university, as it encourages professors to stay put rather than move around from one university to another, looking for better pay or conditions (Trower, 2008). As a result, by granting tenure, universities usually keep their professors for the rest of their careers (Trower, 1999).

There is a potentially negative side to this of course, in that once professors have tenure, it is difficult to fire them and they may become resistant to influence (Batterbury, 2008). Some professors, once tenured, believe that they do not have to be concerned about the employer's view of them, and they can be resistant to change (Trower, 2008). There is a status to tenure, which contrasts with the experience of not having tenure (Purcell, 2007). Having tenure means that one is now a fixture, a member of the club, a permanent employee, whereas not having tenure is by definition the opposite (Wilson & Walsh, 2003). The effort involved in getting tenure justifies the relief once tenure is acquired (Perna, 2005). This binary division underlines and intensifies the difference between those who have tenure and those who do not (Benton, 2007). This creates a chasm that is very difficult to counteract (Batterbury, 2008). The notion of tenure has the best intention in creating security for scholars and universities. But it is in fact a divisive hierarchical tool for separating haves from have-nots in the university system (Sjoberg, 1998). It encourages competition, superiority, exclusion, and inequity (Schrodt, Cawyer, & Sanders, 2003).

The reputation and independence that the world of higher education enjoys has resulted in its having its own set of moral rules for self-governance, and this has been relatively undisputed by courts of law and the public (Wilson & Walsh, 2003). Universities are usually left alone to discipline their own employees (Trower, 2008). However, the dangers of subjective peer review and power plays within university departments

have resulted in discriminatory processes and outcomes in many documented cases (Bonner, 2004; Fogg, 2005; Purcell, 2007; Perna, 2005; Smallwood, 2001; Wilson & Walsh, 2003; Connell & Savage, 2001). Some tenure successes have relied on personal relationships more than merit, in fact handicapping those who achieve far beyond their peers' expectations (Douglas & George, 2000).

Academics who achieve ahead of their time, especially those untraditionally part of the academic community, such as females, and people of varied multicultural backgrounds, disrupt the normal apple cart of academia (Connell & Savage, 2001). One might ask why processes of discrimination are alive and well in a setting where rationality and freedom of thought are meant to prevail. I have asked myself these questions as I journeyed through the path toward tenure in the last few years. This paper is intended to provide some insight into the realities of the tenure process, while also attempting to analyze the data using a Bourdieuian perspective. Pierre Bourdieu (1986, 1990a, 1990b, 1991, 1995, 1998) was a French sociologist who developed his theory of social structure by analyzing several different cultural settings, including his own academic environment (1988). His holistic and individual approach to understanding the forces at play within any field of society, is very useful as it allows one to see the whole of the field of academia, while also appreciating the micro forces operating on a personal and interpersonal level.

A Quick Bourdieu Primer

Bourdieu observed many examples of social systems and developed a theory that organized humans in terms of *fields*, *capital*, and *habitus*. Many fields exist within any given society, each with their own rules of engagement (Bourdieu, 1986, 1990a, 1990b, 1991, 1998). Within the field of academia, there are such subfields as individual disciplines, different levels of academic governance within a university, and national and international trends (Bourdieu, 1988). Academics learn the rules of academia as they make their way through the profession, from their years as student and protégé, to tenure track, tenure, and promotion (Bourdieu, 1988).

Each individual has his or her own capital, including economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital. Economic capital refers to the money the person has. This can relate to one's profession or inheritance (Bourdieu, 1995). Cultural capital refers to one's language, education, and participation in the culture of one's peers. Cultural capital is closely

linked to economic capital, as one may have access to culture depending on one's income and vice versa. Bourdieu argued that the capital that comes with tenure is closely tied to one's social capital in the academic workplace (Haugaard, 2002). But it also relates to the larger market of supply and demand. In the crisis of 1968 in France, Bourdieu found that because more students were demanding access to higher education, there was an increased demand for professors. This changed the supply of professors and had an effect on competition for positions afterwards (Bourdieu, 1988).

In this analysis, Bourdieu showed how economics can shift the balance between the players in a field, thereby changing the power that each has to exert against their competition. Normally, when there is a relatively small pool of qualified professors, their power, which they express as cultural capital through their education, their social capital, and their economic capital, keeps out would-be competition through an unspoken elitism and this is not challenged. A crisis can intervene when the conditions of market and demand change, or when the philosophy of society changes, as it did in the 1960s in France and worldwide. When this happens, the social structure can change, but usually it is very stable and is maintained by the strictures of capitalism through the elitism of academia (Haugaard, 2002).

How do individuals maintain their identities within such a bounded social structure as academia? Bourdieu used the word "habitus" to represent this sense we all have of our physical and psychological identity in the fields we inhabit. Habitus is not necessarily felt consciously, but it encompasses everything we do. We recognize habitus in others as well, and we compare ourselves to others constantly. The messages we internalize from our professions or workplaces are tied to our education, our family professional background and upbringing, and our social relationships (Bourdieu, 1991). We do not question our place in society as it is part of a very-well supported and integrated social class system (Bourdieu, 1995). As fledgling academics, we buy into the system of "paying our dues" on the sessional or tenure track, in hopes of one day achieving tenure. We think success relies solely on our effort, but indeed it relies just as much on our relationships to our peers and superiors (Bourdieu, 1988). Bourdieu would argue that these two phenomena are interrelated. We develop relationships with superiors by taking on the role of inferior, and working very hard during the tenure track years. Meanwhile, those having tenure have the power to demand this work of their untenured colleagues. This sets up a balance of power that keeps

the hierarchical structure of academia stable and consistent (Bourdieu, 1988). "Knowing one's place" ensures that power is not taken before it has been won legitimately through the traditional rites of passage of tenure attainment. This includes teaching, researching, and writing at a furious rate to establish oneself as a worthy candidate for membership in the tenured community.

The attainment of tenure is not much different from any other hierarchy of a profession. The symbolic status of tenure is won after a battle with one's self, yet the tenured also exert the same discrimination upon new recruits as they received themselves (Haugaard, 2002). This constantly renewing pattern reinforces the distinction between haves and have nots, and seems fair to its participants due to their perspective and the traditional nature of the rules of play (Bourdieu, 1995). Bourdieu used the terms "illusio" and "misrecognition" to describe the subconscious acceptance of these rules of engagement by both perpetrators and victims. The game seems fair because some win and some lose, and all who win believe that it is due to merit (Bourdieu, 1988). Merit may be conveyed on a candidate with bias due to the social capital they share with the peers who judge their work and suitability for tenure. Those who lose tenure bids have been rejected, not only professionally but socially, and as a result may not feel worthy to contest the decision (Fogg, 2002). Bourdieu's argument is that the decision is often based on unmeasurable and unspoken criteria, due to the capital forces at play (1988). The lack of clear criteria makes it very difficult for unsuccessful candidates to contest results (Connell & Savage, 2001).

Bourdieu analyzed the victimization and subjugation of groups within societies, according to economic, racial, religious, linguistic, gender, age, and other lines (1986, 1990a, 1990b, 1991). The acceptance of discrimination within our society continues because we associate lower or higher status to people depending on what we as a society value, be it education, wealth, cultural aspects, appearance, ability, and many other aspects of capital. The traditional image or profile of an academic as a white male is being challenged in today's age due to attempts to include more diverse populations in our faculties (Bonner, 2004). However, in reality, there is still discrimination toward minority members of faculties (Wilson & Walsh, 2003). Bourdieu argues that change challenges the status quo consisting of sections of society still holding power within their fields and within society in general. In the field of academia, this includes those with tenure, high rank, and their accompanying financial security, cultural, and social capital. This

includes having the *right* education from the right universities, the right friends, and the right familial structures and supports (Bourdieu, 1988; Perna, 2005).

Bourdieu and the Changing Face of Tenure

The idea of tenure is going through a challenging time as private and public universities are facing economic hardships (Sjoberg, 1998; Trower, 2008). American and even some European and Australian universities are trying to replace tenure with new flexible contract systems that do not require universities to commit to employees for their entire careers (Batterbury, 2008). Tenure requires that employees are safe from losing their positions. This costs universities money. But implicit in the desire to get rid of tenure is universities' growing annoyance with employees whose interests, productivity, ability, or willingness to attract funding do not match those of their employers (Batterbury, 2008). The issue of money goes beyond the cost of employing a professor for his or her career. It also extends to how many students he or she is willing to teach in a class, which courses he or she is willing to teach, how many research grants he or she is willing to apply for, and so on. The willingness of new hires to do whatever it takes just to get a job means that their productivity may be higher. Non-tenured employees are willing to teach larger, more introductory level courses, for less money (Purcell, 2007).

This division between tenured and non-tenured personnel is becoming wider and wider as universities resist hiring tenure-track professors to take the place of retirees. The inherent inequity between the two extremes is heightened when conditions for non-tenured personnel are made much worse (Purcell, 2007; Benton, 2007). There is a difference between hiring tenure track personnel and hiring sessional instructors with no promise of tenure track status. This creates an even lower rung on the ladder of academia. The fact that many sessional instructors have a PhD adds more fuel to the fire. What is the difference in value or qualification of a person in either a tenure-track or non-tenure track position if both have a PhD? Using a Bourdieuian lens, one can say that this new lower level of status in the department takes the place of the former two tiers of tenure track and tenured faculty. As demands increase for faculty to teach more as numbers of students increases and funding declines, the new level of sessional staff fills a need for staff who are willing to teach more for less money. The market-driven strategy of universities to spend less on hiring threatens faculty power in general but increases the power of those with tenure within

their departments due to proportionately smaller numbers of tenured faculty.

These new university approaches to budgeting gives departments and universities the arbitrary means to designate tenure track positions to more deserving candidates, yet the designation may be at best arbitrary and subjective. Those given tenure-track appointments may have more promising CVs or they just may be more alluring to departments because they come from another university and carry an exotic identity (Benton, 2007). This would contrast with someone who has been working for the department for several years in an untenured capacity and seems less exotic in comparison. The capital associated with new hires may also fall under areas considered more financially lucrative. University programs may reflect areas of need in terms of student demand rather than focusing on creating balance of interests within a department or university. It may become more and more important for new tenure track hires and tenure allocations to correspond to market needs rather than the merit of each individual applicant (Sjoberg, 1998).

The issue of collegiality has been raised in recent years with regard to tenure criteria (Fogg, 2002; Connell & Savage, 2001; Lewin, 2002). Traditionally criteria have been limited to teaching, research or scholarly achievement, and service, but collegiality adds another element that brings its own ambiguity and potential for segregation. Bourdieu (1988) argued that collegiality reflects a wish for members of a social group to share similar characteristics and social patterns. For a new professor to fit in with an existing departmental culture, he or she needs to gauge the expectations and adjust his or her behaviours and beliefs at least outwardly to match the status quo. One would think that in a university or any work environment, new employees would be valued for the new ideas they bring that extend the potential of a department beyond its current scope (Bonner, 2004).

New professors are often sought to fill gaps in a department's offerings or bring other skills, perspectives, and approaches from another place of learning (Sjoberg, 1998). This would be an idealistic cross-pollination that would benefit the department, students, and community on the whole. But this is not necessarily what happens in academia or anywhere else. The new professor may bring ideas from another place not previously explored by the existing department, but usually the new professor is thought to have something valued by the department (Bourdieu, 1988). This new person is bringing capital to the

department. It could be knowledge, social connections, and cultural capital in terms of association with another desirable university that the person is coming from. Perhaps his or her color, language, education, previous work experience, success in obtaining research grants, or the reputation of the alma mater, all contribute to the new workplace (Bonner, 2004).

Yet if this new recruit does not fit in with the existing social culture, something that is not always accurately surmised at the job interview, what then? Or what if the new recruit is not the top choice because the top choice turned them down? Sometimes departments choose not to hire anyone one year because of a lack of desirable candidates (Benton, 2007). But if this happens, the department may lose the opportunity to hire anyone next year if it seems they do not need a professor and can fill teaching gaps with a sessional person.

Research and news chronicles seem to point to a conflict in academia between hiring for the difference a new recruit brings in terms of positive capital, and the change in perspective that he or she may force in the status quo (Haag, 2005; Wilson & Walsh, 2003; Baron, 2003). Sometimes new personnel turn out to be so similar to the status quo that they are a threat to it. Take for example a woman who is hired due to her terrific track record and potential, in a male-dominated department (Smallwood, 2001). She may have a very similar work ethic and anti-social approach as her colleagues. Yet because she surpasses the expectations of her peers (ironic considering they hired her precisely based on her achievements and potential for the department), she may be rejected come tenure time due supposedly to an uncollegial attitude. What may be the truth here is that her similarity to the group was encouraged from the start in terms of her aggressive ambition to succeed. Yet her difference from the group in terms of being a woman with these behaviours was incongruous to the peer group and as a result they rejected her (Haag, 2005; Perna, 2005).

Using a Bourdieuian lens, one could argue that her capital surpassed that of her colleagues, and they needed to stop this because it was a threat to their own (Bourdieu, 1988). So they curtailed her membership in the group and blamed it on her behaviour as a different-looking and differently defined member (woman) in a social group that was predominantly male. It might seem perfectly acceptable for the male members of the group to blame her for her lack of success in attaining tenure. In fact it is very difficult to prove discrimination in cases like these because members use what seem like very legitimate criteria such

as collegiality, to describe the failure of an individual's fit within the group. In this case, social capital clashes with cultural and economic capital. Because the peers do not care as much about the new colleague's success as it benefits the university or students as they care about how it makes them look inept in comparison, her social status becomes the way that she is rejected. Her inherent difference as a female is the unspoken basis of her rejection from the group.

Douglas and George (2000) offer tongue-in-cheek directions for new recruits on how to secure tenure. They suggest such tactics before applying for tenure as keeping one's opinions to oneself during faculty meetings, not challenging others' opinions, flattering senior faculty, downplaying one's own achievements, putting off getting married and having children, avoiding membership in any associations such as unions that would threaten the institution, and being very aware of colleagues' impressions of you. In other words, it is very important to establish yourself as a non-threatening member of the group. Yet the authors also contend that it does not hurt to let it be known that you are aware of your rights and are not afraid to involve unpleasant outside parties such as litigation. Court cases would paint an unpleasant picture of one's peers and cost a great deal of money on the part of the university to defend itself. So one needs to have the capital to understand the social mores of the group, while also having some clout in one's pocket. This balancing of personal power and awareness of one's position within the group seems daunting and, sadly, for new recruits, a grave time consumer and sacrifice in terms of personal life.

In fact, Perna (2005) and others have found that elements of difference from the traditional norm of middle class male-dominated universities do influence the personal lives of 'diverse' personnel. Female professors represent a smaller proportion of the total number of professors, are more likely not to have tenure, not to be promoted, and not to be married or have children. Black and other non-white professors in the US and other countries also face more discrimination and are rejected for tenure more often than their white peers with the same qualifications (Bonner, 2004; Haag, 2005). Similar discrimination is faced by those with alternative sexualities (Purcell, 2007). For men, not being married or having children seems to work against them in the tenure/promotion process (Perna, 2005).

The notion that tenure provides affirmation from one's peer group that one has value and is worthy of continuous permanent employment is based on the social group of peers deciding that they want to continue

to have you around (Bourdieu, 1988). Discrimination based on color, creed, race, sexuality, disability, gender, and so on cannot be named in light of its political incorrectness, and may not even be conscious at all times (Bourdieu, 1988). However, attributing one's inadequacy to a lack of collegiality or even merit is acceptable and evidence can be created or tweaked to support this accusation due to the subjective nature of the evaluation process and the lack of clear policies on evaluative criteria at universities (Trower, 1999). Also, taking cases to court is a problem because courts tend to side with institutions over individuals in cases of human resources (Wilson & Walsh, 2003). The boss is seen as holding the cards in terms of employment, so that even criteria that are not clearly stated up front, such as collegiality, are often upheld in court as a reasonable expectation of all employees (Sjoberg, 1998).

Recommendations for Future Discussion

Many issues have been brought up in this paper and I am not sure that some of them are solvable within the parameters of the social structure that universities inhabit (Bourdieu, 1988). The indirect ownership of what professors and scholars contribute to the university could be contested (Batterbury, 2008). Do scholars' ideas or products actually belong to the university? Who are professors actually working for- their departments, faculties, universities, communities, their fields, themselves, the human race? The confusion between loyalty to one's field, department, and university seems to cause problems for new professors, and is something that even veteran professors have to balance (Schrodt, Cawyer, &Sanders, 2003). Using a Bourdieuian lens, one can see that if these circles have different rules of play, it can be difficult for individuals to reconcile them all (Bourdieu, 1988). The tenure process presents a heightened experience of this tension between local and larger circles of membership in which each individual professor must prove him or herself worthy in order to have the freedom that comes with tenure to pursue his or her own goals.

Certainly more support for new professors and more clarity in terms of expectations would be beneficial to help them understand early, the lay of the law so that they are not unpleasantly surprised come tenure application time (Schrodt, Cawyer, & Sanders, 2003). More clarity in terms of criteria for tenure also is needed (Trower, 2008). A consistency between and within departments would be helpful to allow scholars to feel that the process is fair and transparent. Policies regarding conflict of interest and a fair sharing of participation on departmental and

university-wide tenure evaluation committees would be beneficial (Wilson & Walsh, 2003).

The discrimination that exists across universities internationally needs to be addressed. Perhaps members of committees and departments are not aware of the extent of the discrimination. I was certainly not aware of it until I did the research for this article. As Bourdieu (1988) related, scholars do not tend to like to analyze their own working relationships with each other. The lack of logic between the merit of some professors and their treatment due to a completely unrelated association is dumbfounding. One would expect professors to be more sensitive to the potential for discrimination, but in fact it seems that the power invested in the peer review process can actually allow and incite this kind of discrimination. Discrimination based on any number of factors needs to be named and included in policy, taught to faculty members, and discussed openly to disarm the secretive or unconscious nature that it inhabits at the moment. If professors are hired due in part to their minority status, they need to be coached and their peers need to be trained in how to adapt to diversity and support it.

The academy has the potential to change the world, and lead so many positive changes to society. But of course, as a fixed learning institution, it holds on to many traditional positions of power and does not always want to let go of these. The behaviors that are shown in private behind the closed doors of departments and senior management board rooms are not congruous with the image of universities as forward thinking creators and innovators. Likewise, individual scholars receive conflicting messages from their peers as they embark on their careers. Be productive, but do not threaten other's images with your productivity. Be outspoken in the community, but do not speak out in faculty meetings. Support your students, but do not support student union associations or young colleagues who are trying to enter academia as a career. Bourdieu would say that universities straddle two worlds by maintaining the traditional social structures of society, while protecting personal freedom for individual scholars through tenure.

This tenuous balance is being threatened by a business model that is trying to underscore every aspect of current society. I hope that the world of academia asserts its power to maintain freedom of thought and action for its scholars. Without this symbolic status, the notion of personal freedom is in danger of being lost from future students, thinkers, and society in general. Academics need to realize that by being

insular and competitive, we endanger all of our freedoms. Only by supporting our peers' successes and displaying openness to diversity do we all stand to gain more power for ourselves and a better model of society for the world in general. In writing this paper, I have renewed my commitment to resist the negative potential in the academic world and to represent and support diversity. I hope that academics continue to have and use their security and freedom to work with others, speak freely, and offer positive ideas both within their institutions and as a model to the world.

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