Divided, Strategic, Or Something Else? Exploring the Impact of Social Mobility on Habitus

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Social mobility is theorized to result in either a divided habitus or a strategic habitus. Findings from life history interviews reveal that upward and downward mobility produce different effects on the habitus because the experiences are valued differently. The intersections of race and gender are also considered.

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EXTMENDED ABSTRACT

Bourdieu’s theory of distinction is commonly applied to social mobility. According to this theory, social mobility results in a divided habitus where individuals are forever caught between two competing habitus. However, other have suggested that mobile individuals can pick and choose their habitus at will, a position termed a strategic habitus. Both positions have received empirical support, raising two questions. First, does the experience of social mobility conform more closely to the idea of the divided habitus or strategic habitus? Second, what factors influence the outcome?

Bourdieu’s theory of distinction is used to approach these research questions. Briefly, this theory works to understand how individuals draw boundaries between different social groups and compete to arrange them hierarchically. The currencies in this competition are social, economic, and cultural capital. Social class is believed to be mirrored in the amount of and type of capital possessed (Bermthal, Crockett, and Rose 2005; Carfagna et al 2014; Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2012; Holt 1998; Moisio, Arnould, and Gentry 2013; Üstüner and Holt 2007, 2010).

Cultural capital can be objectified in consumption items, displayed through consumption behaviors and practices known as taste, or embodied in the habitus. An individual’s habitus can be expressed in a variety of ways including “standing, speaking, walking, […] feeling and thinking” (Bourdieu 1990a, 70). Habitus is not only a characteristic of an individual, but is also shared among those in a group such as a social class (Bourdieu 1990b, 77). What happens when an individual’s social class changes? Does their habitus change?

Bourdieu theorizes that social mobility, whether upward or downward, results in a divided habitus. Bourdieu describes how upward-mobile students “continually desire reintegration in their community of origin but at the same time are also unable to fully assimilate into the elite” (Bourdieu 1998, 107). This outcome is known as a divided habitus or a habitus clivé and has received empirical support (Aarseth, Layton and Nielsen 2016; Lawler 1999; Saaticologu and Üstüner and Holt 2007, 2010).

However, Lahire (2011) downplays the notion of a divided habitus as one of many contradictions an individual experiences. Emmison (2003) emphasizes that individuals make strategic, tactical choices in which habitus to use. Such ideas have found empirical support (Abrahams and Ingram 2013; Demetry, Thurf, and Fine 2015; Lehman 2009). Here, this position is referred to as a strategic habitus.

A total of 26 life history interviews were conducted. Respondents were first screened for subjective social mobility and semi-structured questions were included measure mobility objectively. Respondents were nearly evenly composed of men and women. Most were white, while others classified themselves as belonging to one or more racial or ethnic groups. There was also a wide age range and respondents came from every region of the United States. The grounded theory method was used to guide the analysis and interpretation of the interviews (Fischer and Otnes 2008; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Goulding 2005; Spiggle 1994). Attention was given to habitus as well as other closely related concepts. The habitus itself has been subdivided into emotional (Arsel and Bean 2013) and moral (Saaticuglu and Ozanne 2013) dimensions. While habitus and consumption are conceptually distinct, in practice they overlap and intertwine with one another and attention is given to both constructs in the analysis.

Does the experience of social mobility conform more closely to the idea of the divided habitus or the strategic habitus? Results suggest that the direction of mobility plays a crucial role in determining the outcome. Furthermore, changes in the habitus do not always align with either the divided or the strategic habitus.

For the downwardly mobile, habitus appears resistant to change. Adelaide’s story vividly illustrates downward mobility and a habitus that remains upper class. She comes from an upper class family and attended exclusive private schools in her youth. However, the death of a parent meant a series of sudden, downward movements for her throughout adolescence. In adulthood she married a working class man and the differences between Adelaide and her husband reveal that her habitus is still rooted in the upper class. She openly invokes her pedigree to explain why she has a different “level set” than her blue collar husband. She admits to “judging” his coworkers and bristles at working class children being fed Mountain Dew, sporting buzzcuts, wearing camouflage, and using improper grammar. Her judgements indicate she retains her original habitus. This is because there is little incentive for downwardly mobile individuals to adjust to a less valued habitus.

In contrast, the upwardly mobile exhibit more change to their habitus. It no longer matches their original habitus but neither does it entirely conform to their new class. One example of such change comes from Adam, the son of immigrant parents who have moved steadily upward from the lower class. Overall, he describes himself falling somewhere in-between his parents and his new milieu. For example, Adam is “off-put” by his girlfriend’s ability to spend $300 or $400 in one shopping trip. Such feelings indicate his habitus has not completely changed to fit his new class. For the upwardly mobile, one’s habitus falls somewhere between their origin and destination.

Upward and downward mobility have different effects on taste because they are very different experiences. Downward mobility is embarrassing and provides no incentive for those who experience it to change their habitus. For the upwardly mobile the move up is celebrated, providing an incentive to change. It is also worth reconsidering whether Bourdieu’s concept of a divided habitus accurately captures the experience. Rather than reflecting double isolation, the habitus appears blended. Additional work must also consider the role played by race, gender, and other characteristics as they intersect with social mobility. Overall, this work provides a look into the experience of social mobility. Investigating the effects is particularly important given the frequent, dynamic nature of mobility in the United States. The frequency of mobility also makes it essential to understand how mobility affects habitus and consumer behavior generally. Exploring social mobility also highlights the need to revisit traditional theories of the habitus.

REFERENCES


