Storying Bourdieu: Fragments Toward a Bourdieusian Approach to “Life Histories”

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Abstract
While the conceptual system developed by Pierre Bourdieu has been sporadically employed within the context of life history research, the complexity of this task has often not been appreciated. This article offers a provisional attempt to explore how Bourdieusian sociology might approach life history material, focusing specifically on conceptual interpretation rather than data collection or the practicalities of data analysis. This article is self-consciously not forwarded as a coherent or finalized “Bourdieusian theory of the life history”; rather, I offer a series of fragmented insights that may be useful to future scholars working in this context. In particular, I note the importance of methodological eclecticism to Bourdieu, the concept of the “social trajectory,” the consideration of self-narrative as strategy, the interrogation of habituated assumptions, the role of symbolic violence, and the notion of the “cleft habitus.” I conclude by contending for the importance of capturing the complexity of life history material using multiple, overlapping, and potentially conflicting heuristic paradigms.

Keywords
Bourdieu, life history, qualitative research, narrative, habitus, social trajectory

Introduction
Pierre Bourdieu’s writings straddled a diverse array of substantive areas—incorporating considerations of matrimony, class, neoliberalism, education, academia, art, literature, television, photography, sport, gender, language, politics, and science. His social theory has inspired a raft of further theoretical and empirical scholarship (Fowler, 2004; King, 2000; McNay, 1999; Susen, 2013; Wacquant, 1995). The central objective underpinning Bourdieu’s theoretical/empirical program was the development of a political economy of practice designed to transcend dualisms that commonly inform sociological thought, between objectivism/subjectivism, macrosociology/microsociology, coercion/freedom, structure/agency, culture/nature, theory/research, and materialism/idealism (Wacquant & Bourdieu, 1989). While Bourdieu is commonly cited as a “social theorist,” he consistently contended that sociological theory existed for the sake of research (Bourdieu, 1988, pp. 774–775) and pragmatically deployed diverse empirical methods throughout his academic career.

This article articulates an understanding of how a Bourdieusian sociological framework interacts with life history data, with a particular emphasis on the conceptual interpretation of this material rather than data collection or the practicalities of data analysis. Life history methods have been a booming research paradigm within sociology in recent decades, implicating a range of thematic interests and approaches (Bertaux & Kohli, 1984, p. 218; Goodley, 1996, p. 341), intense disputes about the epistemological/ontological status of the material (Carr, 1986; Ricoeur, 1991), and debates about whether self-narrative contributes to progressive political agendas (Barton, 1996; Lunn & Munford, 2007) or reproduces regulatory neoliberal ideologies (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997). While Bourdieusian social theory has sporadically been employed within the context (broadly defined) of life history sociology (e.g. Wacquant, 1995; Charlesworth, 2000), the complexities of this task have not been well appreciated (see Reed-Danahay, 2005 for an important exception). This reflects the simultaneous tendency for previous applications of Bourdieu’s theoretical framework to neglect his sustained critique of the role of narrative data within sociology while, equally, failing to exploit the complex opportunities that his conceptual repertoire offers.

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In this article, I elucidate the synergies, opportunities, and foreclosures involved in the consideration of life history material within the context of Bourdieusian social theory. What follows is not offered as a totalizing model but rather a series of interpretive fragments designed to offer a tentative understanding of the possibilities and ambiguities involved in negotiating life history material from a Bourdieusian perspective. This approach reflects Stanley’s (2013) call for a “fractured foundationalism” in the examination of “auto/biography” that recognizes the value of working with life history material from a “kaleidoscopic” variety of intersecting frames, perspectives, methodologies, and epistemic angles. The notion of “life history” research is, of course, itself immensely diverse, potentially subsuming a range of source materials (interviews, videos, letters, diaries, auto/biographies, journals, and blogs), modes of collection (elicited, coconstructed, and “found”), and genres of communication (written, spoken, visual, multimedia, and mediated; Donaldson, 1997; Woods, 2011). This article broadly focuses on life history material involving written or spoken forms of self-representation, although the insights developed may prove relevant within the context of alternative approaches.

**Bourdieu’s Ambivalence Toward The Self-Account**

Bourdieu’s theoretical and empirical agenda conceives of practice in “genetic structuralist” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 8) terms, and practice, as it unfolds within temporally and spatially specific contexts, is understood as being channeled by socially derived, implicit, and largely precognitive sets of “fuzzy” principles, embodied through the habitus (Bourdieu, 1977a, p. 113). These both reflect, and tend to reproduce, the historical conditions within which they were generated. For Bourdieu, cultural competence necessitates that the principles underlying practice are not articulated through explicit pedagogical intervention nor necessarily formally “known” by actors; they are, instead, imperceptibly rooted in the dispositions, embodied habits, patterns of perception/categorization, and emotional resonances of the habitus. This conceptualization of practice as “nonrandom and yet never rationally mastered” (Bourdieu, 2000b, pp. 116–117), the significance ascribed to the silent implications of embodiment and affect (Bourdieu, 2004), and the theorization of actors as motivated by the agonistic pursuit of self-interested ends (Bourdieu, 1973; Honneth, Kocyba, & Schwibs, 1986) have been understood by some as indicating that Bourdieusian sociology rests uncomfortably with methodological approaches centered upon self-narration (Fowler, 2004, pp. 151–152; Jenkins, 1992, pp. 31–32).

This contention is far from baseless. At times, Bourdieu (1990a, p. 102) describes insider accounts as “dangerous,” and sociological deployments of this material, he fears, may presume that actors have a thorough understanding of the historical preconditions of their own experiences and unwittingly introduce an implicit philosophy of practice as driven by processes of reflective justification, rather than an intuitive “feel for the game.” The accounts provided by informants, as “discourses of familiarity,” often “leave unsaid all that goes without saying,” rendering the doxic and unspoken principles of practice invisible. As “outsider-orientated discourses,” there is also a tendency to describe experience in abstract, general terms, often employing a language of rules rather than describing the habituated practices of everyday life (Bourdieu, 1977a, p. 18). Most perniciously, for Bourdieu, narrative accounts coax informants into adopting an artificial and reflective “distance” from their own practice. The individual prompted to narrate their own experiences is subsequently lulled into “theoreticist” errors, substituting the “fuzzy,” intuitive, and situated nature of everyday practice for a “sociological” emphasis on rules, models, and formal logic (Bourdieu, 1977a, pp. 18–19, 1990a, pp. 98–105).

Bourdieu (2005, 2008b, p. 1) holds particular concerns about life history methods as outlined in The Biographical Illusion. These accounts, he argues, are “conventional” and “illusory” and are based upon an implicit, problematic, and unspoken commitment to a particular philosophy of the subject (Speller, 2008, p. 1). The life history account, he argues, conceives of each individual life as a coherent, cumulative “project.” Each subject, according to Bourdieu (2005, pp. 299–301), is prompted to consider their lives as determined by an ahistorical sense of agency and directed by a coherent, overarching “purpose.” He contends that there is a tendency within these sociological approaches to theorize the self in terms of a totalizing, narrateable entity, rather than the more fragmented, partial, and contradictory logics that Bourdieu (2005) regards as more attuned to the realm of lived experience. This “common-sense philosophy” (Speller, 2008, p. 1) of the autonomous, modernist subject reconfigures practice as the outcome of processes of rational deliberation and “choice,” rather than as emerging from the socially derived and implicit logics of the embodied habitus (Bourdieu, 2005). The conceptualization of each individual as a coherent object of analysis is, he argues, not an unproblematic theorization of selfhood but rather reflects an understanding of “the individual” that is buttressed by eminently historical patterns of social organization (Bourdieu, 2005, pp. 299–301).

These critiques of “life history” research are, in many senses, overly totalizing, offering a simplistic and homogenizing account of a body of work characterized by innovation and self-interrogation. While generic conventions surrounding the conscious development and enactment of coherent “life projects” are by no means absent, there have, equally, been multiple scholarly interventions designed to work beyond the reductive autobiographical conceptualizations of “selfhood” that Bourdieu identifies. To indicate only a fraction of emergent approaches within the area, contemporary work has explicitly highlighted the methodological, theoretical, and ethical limitations engendered through generic commitments to narrative “coherence” (Hyvärinen, Hydén, Saarenheimo, & Tamboukou, 2010, pp. 8–10); researchers have employed fragmented approaches to life history, designed to capture the multiplicity of selfhood through the usage of “collages” of analytic, pictorial, literary, and multimedia modes of
presentation (Passerini, 1996); and, finally, the critique of “autobiographical” modes of self-representation as the reflection of a historically specific neoliberal individualism has been well developed (Barrett, 2014).

Yet, despite these concerns, Bourdieu consistently does employ material that could, broadly construed, be located within the tradition of life history methods (Reed-Danahay, 2005, pp. 129–150). His early Algerian anthropology draws substantially upon interview material (Bourdieu, 1972), including a seemingly verbatim transcript of an uninterrupted narrative from a “folk economist” (Bourdieu, 2000a, pp. 29–38). His English language collection of research examining the “problem” of bachelorhood among the Béarn incorporates both dialogues and orally communicated recollections (Bourdieu, 2008a, pp. 111–120). In The State Nobility, he draws upon written narrative material—including published autobiographies (Bourdieu, 1996a, p. 107), newsletters (Bourdieu, 1996a, pp. 124–127), and exstudent written accounts (Bourdieu, 1996a, pp. 404–411)—to elucidate the patterns of ritual “election” generated within the elite French schooling system. Homo Academicus incorporates an autobiographical account from Lévi-Strauss (Reed-Danahay, 2005, p. 136). In The Rules of Art, Bourdieu extensively relies upon authors’ letters, diaries, and notebooks to underpin his analysis of the literary field (Bourdieu, 1996b; Speller, 2011). And, finally, accompanied by a sizable research team, Bourdieu’s best-selling text The Weight of the World (Bourdieu, 1999) consists substantially of interview-based narratives expressing histories of “suffering” within neoliberalizing France.

Further, Bourdieu occasionally explicitly praises the sociological possibilities offered by life history narrative. In The Weight of the World he (1999, p. 511) notes that “narratives about the most “personal” difficulties, the apparently most strictly subjective tensions and contradictions, frequently articulate the deepest structures of the social world and their contradictions.” In a footnote from The State Nobility (1996a, p. 408; Reed-Danahay, 2005, p. 137), he contends that “autobiographical narratives of writers from the dominated regions of social and geographical space constitute incomparable sociological documents as first-hand accounts of the subjective experiences related to [. . . ] social trajectories (and not of the corresponding “realities”) that are in fact more reliable, being more naïve, than we might think.” (The qualifications placed around these claims [focusing on “dominated” social groups and distinguishing between “experiences” and “realities”] will be considered subsequently). The question, subsequently, becomes not whether self-narrative material can be coherently employed within Bourdieusian sociology but how, when, and why it should be employed.

**Methodological Eclecticism**

Bourdieu maintained a commitment to empirical research throughout his career and claimed that his conceptual repertoire developed pragmatically in response to specific dilemmas encountered “within the field” (Bourdieu, 1996b, pp. 178–179). He expressed hostility toward what he termed “theoretical theory” that emerged through interactions between abstract conceptual systems and remained irrelevant to all but a small enclave of insiders (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 774). From the outset, Bourdieu’s approach to social research could be described as deeply eclectic, and many of his works, perhaps best exemplified by Distinction (1984) but also The Bachelors’ Ball (2008a) and The State Nobility (1996a), involve a “collage,” or “mosaic,” of material that has been derived from a range of methodological approaches. Bourdieu can be found generating sociological insights from statistical analysis (Bourdieu, 1984, 1996a), ethnographic observation (Bourdieu, 2008a), in-depth qualitative interviewing (Bourdieu, 1999), autobiographical material (Bourdieu, 1996a), visual analysis (Bourdieu, 2008a), content analysis (Bourdieu, 1984), and close readings of literary texts (Bourdieu, 1996b, pp. 322–329, 2001, pp. 69–79).

Bourdieu’s methodologically ambivalent understanding of self-narrative, articulated earlier, should be understood as reflecting a commitment to the reflexive interrogation of all research methods (Bourdieu, 1988, pp. 774–775), rather than a refusal to attribute any sociological value to self-narrations (contra Jenkins, 1992, pp. 33–34). It might be briefly worth noting Bourdieu’s ambivalence toward his (seemingly) more favored methods. For instance, while Bourdieu often appears to position statistics as offering epistemologically privileged access to what “really” happened, or as a counter to the “subjectivist” limitations of ethnographic/interview data (Bourdieu, 1977a, pp. 30–32), he also demonstrates awareness of the potential elisions, silences, and difficulties encountered by reliance upon quantitative material, the problematic categories it can reify, and the limited access to the social world it offers (Bourdieu, 1988, pp. 781–782; Jenkins, 1992, pp. 36–37). Equally, while maintaining some form of commitment to ethnographic research throughout his career, and lauding the especial value of direct participation “in the field” (Wacquant, 2011, pp. 86–87), he was, simultaneously, wary of the potential for ethnographers to succumb to the twin dangers of exoticizing the “other” or ethnocentrically “importing” sociological concepts (Bourdieu, 1972, pp. 30–33).

Ultimately, there is no standard “Bourdiesuan” approach to empirical research, with Bourdieu expressly advocating the need to resist “any unilateral, unidimensional and monomanial definition of sociological practice” (Wacquant & Bourdieu, 1989, p. 54). His tendency to invoke a mosaic of research methodologies within the context of any sociological problem reflects a belief in the limitations and ambiguities of all approaches to social research (Bourdieu, 1996a) and an aversion to what John Law (2004, p. 9) terms the “inheritance of hygiene” that conflates methodological rigor with the replication of textbook formulae. What is required, rather than an adherence to formalized methodological “magic ritual(s)” (Bourdieu, 1988, pp. 774–775), are reflexive considerations of any attempt to formalize understandings of social life—or, to use Bourdiesuan language, the need to “objectify” the tools of “objectification.” It is, perhaps, not so much that
Bourdieuian sociology is incompatible with life history approaches but rather that it necessarily stresses the methodological and epistemological ambiguities of this approach.

From Life Histories To Collective Social Trajectories

Bourdieu (1996b, p. 258) proposes the study of social trajectories as an alternative to the “life history,” involving an analysis of “the series of positions successively occupied by the same agent or the same group of agents in successive spaces.” The reconstruction of social trajectories attempts to mediate between the reduction in “a life” to the acontextual expression of a “choosing” ego (which Bourdieu associates with life history methods), without lapsing into mechanistic forms of structuralist determinism. Bourdieu (1996b, p. 259) recognizes that “(a)ny sociological trajectory must be understood as a unique manner of travelling through social space, where the dispositions of the habitus are expressed”; individuals negotiate prevailing social environments in multiple and strategic ways, reflecting the distinctive opportunities, meanings, and foreclosures they perceive and encounter. Simultaneously, these seeming idiosyncrasies are structured: Certain groups are afforded opportunities, forms of capital, and dispositions that foster collective regularities. The “rhizomatic” figuration of social life proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987, pp. 1–3), involving the simultaneity of unstable relations of singularity among patterns, or differences among structure, might be understood as paralleling the Bourdieusian conceptualization of the “social trajectory.”

The consideration of social trajectories departs from the reconstruction of the flow of an individual life as a coherent teleology, toward a consideration of the social processes through which the “position(s)” or “post(s)” that individuals occupy within social space “become constituted” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 162; J. Collins, 1998, p. 728). Analysis subsequently necessitates attention to the particular historically situated fields/social spaces an individual encounters and “the system of positions in which the events in an agent’s life take place” (Speller, 2011, p. 59). The turn toward the concept of “social trajectory” subsequently involves a reprimis of Bourdieu’s often asserted maxim surrounding the need to “think relationally” (Wacquant & Bourdieu, 1989, p. 39), and it is not sufficient to consider a phenomenon (such as “a life”) in isolation but rather necessary to understand it as inherently situated within, and positioned both through and against, other phenomena. The sociological conception of an individual life, Bourdieu (2008b, p. 4) writes, requires an understanding of “the field with which and against which (s)he has been formed.”

Social trajectories reflect “collective histories” (Reed-Danahay, 2005, p. 129), necessitating a consideration of “the collection of other agents engaged in the same field and facing the same realm of possibilities” (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 304). As Reed-Danahay (2005) and Speller (2011, p. 41) note, a Bourdieusian approach to social trajectory requires a consideration of the “generative structures,” embedded both within social space and the habitus, that predispose individuals toward certain practices, self-understandings, experiences, and social relationships. Life history data, from this perspective, subsequently necessitates interpretation in light of features of social life that may be only implicitly present within the material itself but that are, nevertheless, integral to the shaping of biographical trajectories. Bourdieu (1996b, pp. 258–259) writes that: “(t)rying to understand a career or a life as a unique and self-sufficient series of successive events without any other link than association with a ‘subject’ […] is almost as absurd as trying to make sense of a trip on the metro without taking the structure of the network into account, meaning the matrix of objective relations between the different stations.” It is, as such, necessary to interpret life history material in light of a “detour” through the “construction of social space” to elucidate the invisible weightiness of historical structure against which individual lives are lived and narrated (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 304).

It is, finally, important to note that Bourdieu’s critiques of life history methods are not entirely convincing. It is hardly the case that the majority of life history sociology emphasizes the singularity of the “choosing” subject without recourse to historical embeddedness, social structures, cultural norms, or interpersonal relationships (Charlesworth, 2000; Goodley, 1996; Passerini, 1996). For the most part, life history research has emphasized the consideration of collectivities rather than individuals (Bertaux-Wiame, 1979; Connell, 1995; Rolph, 2006), and where a single case has been the basis for analysis, careful attention is generally afforded to the broader socially situated nature of findings (Shaw, 1966; Gagen, 2007). Rather than unproblematically valorizing some sense of free-floating voluntarism, work in the field has explicitly engaged with the complex interactions between “structure” and “agency” (Goodson, 2006; Plummer, 2001, p. 106; Stanley, 1993, 2013). The Bourdieusian move from “life history” to “social trajectory” is, for instance, reminiscent of Goodson’s (2006, pp. 16–20) distinction between “life story” and “life history.” As noted by Swartz (1997, pp. 52–56), Bourdieu has a problematic tendency to exaggerate the iconoclasm of this own thought.

The notion of the “social trajectory,” however, offers a conceptual language that may prove useful to many; yet, the movement from personal to social, or individual to collective, is an immensely problematic one. In the following section, I will consider a particular concern that might be regarded as characteristic of Bourdieusian sociology, relating to the interpretation, and problematization, of life history material using the prism of strategy.

Narrative as Strategy

Swartz (1997, p. 56) contends that insider accounts, for Bourdieu, reflect “a practical logic of getting along in (the) social
world,” being “instruments of struggle for practical accomplishments.” Bourdieu (1991, p. 56) states that “(t)exts are naturally the objects of strategies,” presumably an insight that could be extended to interviews, and cautions against social analysts forgetting “that data have been left by people who had an interest in letting them trail behind them” (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 44). For Bourdieu, discourse is saturated by pragmatic power relations: “(l)anguage is a praxis: it is made for saying, i.e. for use in strategies” (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 646). Against Habermas’ desired “ideal speech situation” (Susen, 2013, p. 200), Bourdieu contends that language is never exclusively a neutral instrument for the progressive discernment of “truth” but rather a medium that both reflects, and reproduces, relations of domination (Bourdieu, 1991). Snook (1990, pp. 161–164) contends that this stance implicitly reflects a Nietzschean conception of language, emphasizing discursive “survival value,” rather than a neutral desire to “mirror” the world “out there.”

In Language and Symbolic Power, Bourdieu (1991, p. 107; see also Hanks, 2005, pp. 75–76) uses an economistic vocabulary to capture the role of discourse within social life, and critique linguistic paradigms that “treat language as an autonomous object,” rather than as embedded within relations of symbolic and material power. Every moment of communication, for Bourdieu (1991, p. 66), involves a form of linguistic exchange, “a relation of communication between a sender and a receiver, based on enciphering and deciphering.” The moment of communication is a form of economic exchange “established within a particular symbolic relation of power between a producer, endowed with a certain linguistic capital, and a consumer (or a market)” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 66). The audience for any form of communication needs to be understood as embedded within the moment of verbal or literary expression. Bourdieu (1991, p. 77 see also Snook, 1990) contends that “on the basis of a practical anticipation of the laws of the market concerned, [ . . . ] authors [ . . . ] try to maximize the symbolic profit they can obtain from practices which are, inseparably, oriented towards communication and exposed to evaluation” (see also Susen, 2013, pp. 213–214).

This conceptualization of language as orientated toward the pursuit of “profitable” ends ensures that broader economic and symbolic inequalities will have implications in terms of how “linguistic products” are framed. This involves, on the one hand, individuals drawing upon the various forms of “capital” they have (in terms of economic freedoms, social relations, cultural knowledge, symbolic aura, and linguistic intuition) to advance their “linguistic products” in a way that is likely to accrue value (Jenkins, 1994, pp. 96–98; Susen, 2013, pp. 214–215). On the other hand, because the “value” ascribed to certain linguistic products is determined in relation to the broader social environment, what is said, and how it is said, will be significantly inflected by an intuitive “sense” of how an audience is likely to respond (Susen, 2013, p. 209). As such, “the constraint exercised by the market via the anticipation of possible profit [ . . . ] takes the form of an anticipated censorship, of a self-censorship which determines not only the manner of saying, that is, the choice of language [ . . . ] but also what it will be possible or not possible to say” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 77; see also Bourdieu, 1977b, pp. 653–660, 1991).

The construction of self-narrative as an interested practice, within which actors attempt to accumulate certain forms of material or symbolic reward, offers several interrelated analytic possibilities when considering life history material. The presentation of the self, emphasizing distinct virtues, accomplishments, experiences, and traits, may offer insight into the particular investments that individuals possess and their engagement in historically meaningful “social games” (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 66, 1996b, pp. 333–336). We may consider how self-presentations reflect particular locations within social space and the dilemmas that these engender. The kinds of “capital” that individuals draw upon to generate certain impressions; the values, themes, and interests that underpin the self-representations offered; the implicit “audience” towards which narratives are projected; and how narrativizations may reflect particular forms of “illusio” (Wacquant, 1995, p. 173).

An interrogative awareness of the strategic deployment of life history narratives is an important analytic prism offered by Bourdieusian sociology. Indeed, one can readily envision Bourdieu “disillusioning” us of some of the more optimistic themes sometimes used to justify narrative enquiry (relating to authenticity, voice, empowerment, and subjective truth) by emphasizing the use of narrative for eminently practical ends. However, I cannot fully agree with Swartz’s (1997, p. 56) contention that self-narratives are methodologically employed by Bourdieu solely, or even primarily, to examine the strategic practices of agents or with Snook’s (1990, p. 178) claim that Bourdieu denies “the assumption that language tries to capture the world.” It is, certainly, easy to see how others have arrived at this conclusion, given Bourdieu’s (1977b, 1991) economic theorization of language. Yet, as demonstrated earlier, Bourdieu has used “insider accounts” with a degree of consistency throughout his research career. In light of his theorization of “the economics of linguistic exchange” (Bourdieu, 1977b), it is striking how seldom he considers these forms of data in terms of the self-interested strategies pursued by narrators. Bourdieu’s employment of this material implicitly demonstrates his conviction that these sources have epistemic value beyond self-interested capital accumulation.

Habituated Understandings

The Bourdieusian “habitus” offers a theoretical mediation between accounts of practice as the mechanical expression of underlying social forces or as determined by a free-floating, ahistorical agency (Bourdieu, 1973). The habitus reflects a form of incorporated history, or the durable effects of particular social environments and relationships, and how these shape individual predispositions, tastes, preferences, understandings, assumptions, bodily comportments and emotions (Bourdieu, 1989, pp. 18–20). The habitus is, subsequently, socially acquired: It primarily develops within the context of childhood.
and possesses relative durability. Yet, because the habitus reflects the accumulated effects of practical experiences within social contexts, it continues to evolve in response to new situations (Wacquant, 2005, pp. 319–320). The habitus operates, according to Bourdieu, primarily at a prereflective level, signifying a set of predispositions that agents themselves may not be consciously aware of. While commonly critiqued for determinism (King, 2000), the habitus is a “generative,” rather than a controlling, structure. It reflects the background set of assumptions, perceptions, and preferences that durably predispose agents toward certain decisions but which is always expressed in situ and with a (socially embedded) form of improvisational flexibility (Bourdieu, 1990a, pp. 98–111).

Life history research is commonly vaunted for its capacity to facilitate access to the subjective experiences of narrators (Clandinin, 2006; Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008). As Becker (1966, p. vii) notes in relation to Clifford Shaw’s classic life history study of Stanley the “jack-roller,” narrative material allows us to understand “the actor’s point of view”: “to understand why someone behaves as he does you must understand how (the world) looked to him, what he thought he had to contend with, (and) what alternatives he saw open to him (sic).” In this vein, narrative material may be employed to investigate the incorporated structures of the habitus, to identify the implicit assumptions and taken-for-granted categories that structure the way agents construct and understand themselves and how they perceive the “objective” chances available to them within the broader social space. As Reed-Danahay (2005, p. 132) contends, “(f)or Bourdieu, the life narrative reveals the dispositions of the habitus.”

Yet, the interrogation of habituated, culturally informed assumptions using narrative material is far from straightforward. Agents may, Bourdieu (1996c, pp. 29–30) contends, offer statements that directly contradict the impulses embedded within the habitus, either out of a conscious desire to deceive (Bourdieu, 1991) or, alternatively, because the nature and implications of the habitus are, largely, invisible, taken for granted, and formally “unknown” to individuals (Bourdieu, 2000b, pp. 116–117). This “invisibility” becomes especially problematic when the researcher shares a cultural universe with those being researched (Bourdieu, 1996c, pp. 25–27). The mutual possession of deeply rooted “doxic” assumptions may act to legitimate common-sense realities, rather than facilitating identification of the implicit “generative structures” that Bourdieu (2001) regards as central to the logic of practice. Finally, Bourdieu (1990b) commonly expressed concerns about the “scholastic” tendency to emphasize the realm of the linguistic, to the exclusion of the affective or the corporeal, which, he contends, is central to the functioning of the habitus. Examinations of these embodied/affective elements of the habitus can be facilitated through life history-style material (Couser, 1997; Frank, 2006), but the limitations of (primarily) linguistic or discursive ways of accessing these regions of social life need to be acknowledged.

Symbolic Violence and Narrative Analysis/Analysis of Narrative

Bourdieu’s conceptualization of practice emphasizes the role of symbolic forms and structures in the production and reproduction of social inequality (Swartz, 1997, p. 82; see also Bourdieu, 1977a, 1990a, pp. 112–121). In accordance with Weber, he contends that relations of “domination” are rarely solely secured and legitimated through overt physical violence or constraint and uses the concept of “symbolic power” to refer to the capacity of particular individuals, groups, and institutions to normalize certain methods of interpreting and categorizing social life (Bourdieu, 1989, pp. 18–19). Symbolic power is “the power to make the world by imposing instruments for the cognitive construction of the world” (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 170). The efficacy of symbolic power, according to Bourdieu, reflects the tendency for particular modes of vision and division to be so deeply rooted within both the individual habitus, and surrounding social fields, that they are no longer understood as reflecting the outcomes of historical patterns of contestation and privilege/domination. Instead, these modes of interpretation are naturalized, and their principles are rarely formally articulated but come to reflect a “preverbal,” taken-for-granted understanding of the world that “flows from practical sense” (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 68).

The implications of symbolic power are most pernicious in their tendency to structure the embodied dispositions of subordinated social groups, a process Bourdieu captures through the concept of “symbolic violence.” This is “a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 1) that has a tendency to render the marginalized complicit in their own domination by normalizing relations of power through the acquisition of the habituated schemas, dispositions, and evaluations that pervade the broader historical context. Bourdieu (2000b, p. 169) suggests that “(t)he practical recognition through which the dominated, often unwittingly, contribute to their own domination by tacitly accepting, in advance, the limits imposed on them, often takes the form of bodily emotion (shame, timidity, anxiety, guilt).” The embodied/affective nature of symbolic violence tends to promote a naturalization of inequality and exclusion and to render the historical processes that foster these ways of conceiving, categorizing, and experiencing, difficult to recognize and challenge.

Bourdieu’s critique of symbolic domination necessitates a double-sided relation to narrative material. On the one hand, Bourdieu is emphatic that sociological analysts should not merely relay the ideas presented by informants, or using Garfinkel’s terminology, provide “accounts of the accounts” (cited in Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 26). Apart from the epistemological issues introduced earlier surrounding the sociological awareness of “lay actors,” Bourdieu is quite skeptical (arguably excessively so; Bohman, 1997; Adams, 2006, p. 514) about the politically progressive nature of marginalized social groups, and there is, in his analysis, a consistent tendency to examine how relations of domination are naturalized, rendering
profundely historical social forces seemingly inevitable or necessary from the perspectives of both dominating and dominated groups (Bourdieu, 1984, 2001). For Bourdieu (1973, 1999), sociological considerations of life history narratives must therefore involve a critical interrogation of the way symbolic relations of power both pervade and are (potentially) reproduced through the prism of this material.

Yet, despite expressing skepsis about the inherently progressive value of self-narrative, Bourdieu does ascribe methodological and ethical weight to “voice.” This is especially evident within The Weight of the World, which substantially consists of interview transcripts conducted with differently situated individuals within the context of neoliberal France (Bourdieu, 1999). These narratives, Bourdieu argues, allow us to understand the agent’s “point of view,” a concept that he increasingly invoked toward the conclusion of his research career (Bourdieu, 1988, 1996a, pp. 22–24, 2008a, 2008b). The significance ascribed to “voice” within Bourdieu’s research reflects his desire to counter the reductive impulses of social scientific knowledge, which reduce individuals to the “marionettes” (Dollard, 1949, p. 5) of social structure. Indeed, he contends that qualitative methods have a distinctive value in this regard, accessing the complexities and nuances rendered invisible by the “Archimedean” view of objectivist social science (Bourdieu, 1988). There is, then, a simultaneous desire to historically situate actors and their self-understandings, without rendering them the pawns of historical process or to use Reed-Danahay’s (2005, p. 144) phrase, “to objectify the interviewee’s point of view, but without so distancing a gaze that they become objects.” In this ethic, where “voice” appears in a (seemingly) unmediated form within Bourdieu’s work, it is necessarily accompanied by alternative forms of historical or quantitative data, designed to help identify the “generative structures” (Reed-Danahay, 2005; Speller, 2011) that have produced (but which are also often recursively reproduced by) the perspectives and practices of agents.

Possibilities For Historical Consciousness

Perhaps the overriding implication of the above-mentioned sections is the need to contextualize life history narratives when interpreted within a Bourdieusian framework. Bourdieu is often skeptical about the extent to which individuals understand and represent their lives in historicized terms; rather, this historicization needs to be facilitated by sociologists (Bourdieu, 1977a, 1990a). At times, Bourdieu almost seems to require that agents possess an inability to understand themselves sociologically, reflect through language, or examine the “generative structures” that have formed them (Adams, 2006, p. 514; Bohman, 1997). He contends, for instance, that legitimate sociological insight must be “conquered” against everyday, spontaneous, and intuitive understandings as if these everyday knowledges, by definition, must amount to ideological fabrication (Speller, 2011, pp. 40–41).

Many critics of Bourdieusian sociology have subsequently contended that his conceptual framework either entirely elides or drastically underestimates the reflexive capabilities of “lay” actors. Latour (cited in Adams 2006, p. 514) critiques the sense in which “generative structures” appear to manipulate individuals “behind their backs,” while Bohman (1997, p. 172) notes that, at times, Bourdieu seemingly “require(s) that agents misrecognise” their social situation.” This theorization of actors as intrinsically “inside” of historical process would undoubtedly place substantial limits around the sociological insights offered by autobiographical narrators who primarily become vectors of doxic ideology.

These are legitimate concerns, and, in my view, Bourdieu does consistently underestimate everyday processes of historical awareness, and his perspective compares starkly with Giddens’ (1991) and Beck’s (1992) theorizations of “reflexive modernity.” Simultaneously, however, it would be inaccurate to unambiguously contend that Bourdieu defines agents as “symbolic fools” (as in Bohman, 1997, p. 176), categorically unable to countenance themselves historically (Fowler, 2013, p. 250). For Bourdieu, reflexivity is not a transcendental cognitive capacity but rather a socially generated habitus that can emerge through particular structural configurations of the habitus/field relationship (Adams, 2006, p. 515; Adkins, 2004, pp. 192–195). Awareness of the specificity of the historical situation that one confronts, he contends, is especially liable to emerge within the context of historical crisis or social contradiction, within which habituated dispositions confront a social environment that is in some sense “alien” or “foreign,” rendering individuals “fish out of water” (Davey, 2009). This disjuncture between habitus/field can motivate an appreciation of the doxic assumptions that underpin everyday practice by challenging the unproblematic “common sense” of the “natural attitude.” This experience may even be relatively routine within capitalist societies: Institutionalized instability encourages individuals to move between distinct social fields with regularity (Couldry, 2005, pp. 356–358); globalization fosters contact between alternative social, economic, and political systems; and capitalist technological developments necessitate continual processes of adjustment (McNay, 1999; Wacquant & Bourdieu, 1989, p. 45).

As noted by Reed-Danahay (2005), there is a particular kind of informant that Bourdieu privileges as possessing the capacity to offer sociological insight. Late in his career, Bourdieu increasingly drew upon the concept of the “cleft” habitus as a potentially productive reflexive resource (Fowler, 2013, p. 256). He writes that “occupants of precarious positions” within social space frequently become exceptional “practical analysts.” “(T)hese individuals are constrained, in order to live or to survive,” he contends, “to practice a kind of self-analysis, which often gives them access to the objective contradictions which have them in their grasp, and to the objective structures expressed in and by these contradictions” (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 511). In an analysis strongly reminiscent of P. H. Collins’ (1986) “outsider within,” indeterminacy of social position is, at least potentially, a sociological resource that can be drawn upon to break doxic cycles of reproduction. It is this understanding of the “practical analysis” developed by marginal
social groups that leads Bourdieu to privilege the autobiographical insights of “the dominated,” as suggested earlier (Bourdieu, 1996a, p. 408, 2001, p. 31).

Bourdieu’s (2008b) theorization of reflexivity, or the productive deployment of one’s own habituated experience as a sociological resource, seems, in part, to stem from autobiographical influences. Bourdieu was raised in a rural, outlying region of South-Western France associated with a degree of cultural “backwardness” in relation to the cosmopolitan metropole of Paris (Derluguian & Muth, 2009). His unprecedented upward mobility toward the very peak of the French academic universe resulted in a “strong discrepancy between high academic consecration and low social origin” (Bourdieu, 2008b, p. 100), and the kinds of dispositions, traits, bodily movements, and preferences possessed by most of the French intellectuals he encountered seemed quite foreign, leaving him somewhat of an outsider. This habitus that consisted of multiple, to some extent conflicting, components resulted in a kind of permanent confrontation between the habituated structures and assumptions internalized early in his life with those encountered within the university sector and a subsequent proclivity toward being “obsessant everywhere and completely at home almost nowhere” (Carlson, 2009, p. 473). This sense of class-based exclusion seems to have motivated Bourdieu’s distinctive and insightful critiques of the elitism of French “high” culture, cultural consumption, academia, and elite schooling systems (Speller, 2011, p. 24).

The distinctive historical consciousness that Bourdieu associates with the occupation of socially precarious positions seems to have motivated a methodological preference for particular “kinds” of informants who were “marginal” or caught between “two worlds” (Reed-Danahay, 2005, p. 150). This reflexivity, however, is not unproblematically assumed: The invisibility of habituated assumptions (Bourdieu, 2000b, pp. 116–117), the tendency toward the naturalization of social relationships (Bourdieu, 2001), and patterns of “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu, 1990a, pp. 125–134, 2000b, p. 169) render reliance on any informant to articulate their location within social space a problematic methodological tactic for Bourdieu. No individual is likely to apply a comprehensive historical reflexivity in relation to all elements of selfhood; yet, to redeploy Calhoun’s (1993, p. 81) terminology, Bourdieu’s theorization of the “clef” habitus suggests “certain members of modern societies do so with regards to certain of their practices.”

Conclusion

This article has articulated a range of avenues available for the interrogation of life history data within the context of Bourdieuian social theory. At times, Bourdieu undoubtedly expressed strong concerns about the sociological deployment of this material, particularly in its tendency to reify an overly “intellectualist” or “scholastic” vision of social life at the expense of the intuitive, affective, and corporeal “logic of practice.” Yet, from the use of narrative material within his own research, his (occasionally) optimistic claims about these sources, and the logical extension of his own social theory, it is clear that this methodological approach can be employed meaningfully within a Bourdieusian framework. Several key opportunities for negotiating the nexus between Bourdieu and life history research have been identified, relating to the importance he attached to methodological eclecticism, the progression of collective social trajectories, the interpretation of narrative as strategy, the examination of habituated assumptions, the interrogation of symbolic violence, and the informant reflexivity offered by the “clef habitus.”

This article does not contend that Bourdieu offers a self-sufficient or “complete” framework for engagements with life history material, instead outlining a set of heuristically valuable fragments emerging from his social theory. Several issues remain that Bourdieu does not satisfactorily address. While the nexus between self-narrative and “truth” is touched upon sporadically (Bourdieu, 1996c, 1999), Bourdieu never develops a sufficiently complex or coherent conceptualization of this relationship (Ricoeur, 1991; Riessman, 1993, pp. 8–15). The “fragmented” insights offered here, further, may exist in a tense relationship with one another. How can we reconcile the construction of narrative as “strategic” with the distinctive reflexivity facilitated by the “clef habitus”? How do we balance the idiosyncratic insights facilitated by methodological eclecticism when source materials conflict? How do we practically move from the insights offered by life history narratives to a consideration of social trajectories without committing acts of theoretician bias? These are undoubtedly tensions within Bourdieu’s approach that require reflexive forms of self-critical negotiation; yet, simultaneously, I would contend that the use of life history material necessitates this messiness. This material is so socially, methodologically, epistemologically, and ethically complex that, as other researchers have contended, an equally complex, tense, and overlapping set of analytic paradigms and concerns is required (Stanley, 2013). As John Law (2004, p. 8) suggests, “(T)he world is so rich that our theories about it will always fail to catch more than a part of it [. . .] (W)e cannot step outside the world to obtain an overall ‘view from nowhere’ which pastes all the theory and processes together.” While Bourdieu by no means provides a holistic basis for the theorization of “life history,” his conceptual framework offers a range of potentially productive avenues for future research.

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