Chapter 4
Constructing a Field of Power. Reflections Based on a Norwegian Case Study

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In Pierre Bourdieu’s general theory of the social space, the concept ‘field of power’ occupies a central position. Localized in the areas of the social space where the capital volumes are the highest, the field of power is the arena where agents in dominating field positions engage and are engaged in struggles over power relations internally in a field, as well as in struggles over power relations between hierarchically ordered fields. In this way, Bourdieu’s field approach offers an alternative to what has been the dominating traditions in studies of elites, e.g. the Italian school, based on Mosca, Michels and Paretos positional approach, and Robert A. Dahl’s decisional approach.

But while elites and fields may be universal phenomena, and while Bourdieu’s research program may have universal relevance, this does not imply that the field of power anywhere must have the same structure, comprise the same set of positions, can be constructed on the basis of identical types of capital and capital indicators, or that the relations between the types of capital are the same\(^1\). Assuming the opposite entails a de-contextualization and a de-historization of the research object. Simply to replicate Bourdieu’s empirical strategy, or to expect finding exactly the same oppositions as those Bourdieu found in France, would therefore be highly problematic. It would also entail the kind of pre-construction of the research object that Bourdieu warned so strongly against, and systematically tried to counteract through ‘epistemological ruptures’ (Bourdieu et al. 1973).

\(^1\) See Bennett et al. (2009) for a thorough empirically based discussion of these issues.

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To analyse the structures in a field of power necessitates a twofold work of construction. While seeking to objectivize the relations and oppositions between the most important types of capital in the given social space, the relations and oppositions between the capital types internally in the field of power must also be visualized. At each step, a series of theoretical and methodological problems must be addressed. In this chapter, we’ll discuss some of these challenges and how we addressed them in our attempt at constructing a Norwegian field of power (Hjellbrekke et al. 2007; Denord et al. 2011). Three issues will be raised:

– Challenges involved when doing a comparative field analysis
– Challenges involved when using register data and/or data collected for other purposes than doing a field analysis
– Challenges involved when having to construct proxies for specific capital types, in casu indicators on social capital.

The Social Space and the Field of Power

The strategy that underpinned Bourdieu’s construction of the French social space is well known. Starting from two main principles of social differentiation, economic capital and cultural capital, three main dimensions are objectivized by way of multiple correspondence analysis (Le Roux and Rouanet 2004; Hjellbrekke 2018); a volume dimension that separates between groupings with high and low capital volumes, a structure dimension that discriminates between the relative importance of respectively economic and cultural capital, and a historical dimension which depicts the development of the volume and composition of capital over time (Bourdieu 1979, 1994: 15–35).

The construction of the French field of power was done in multiple stages. “Le Patronat” dealt with the field of business leaders in private and state French enterprises (Bourdieu and St. Martin 1978) and revealed two main oppositions; one between leaders of state enterprises versus leaders of private enterprises, and one between newcomers versus inheritors. Later, in “La Noblesse d’État” (1989) the analysis was expanded to include the field of les Grandes Écoles. The multiple correspondence analysis (Le Roux and Rouanet 2010, Hjellbrekke 2018) showed that two main principles of differentiation are at work in the field; the “Grande Porte”-institutions, i.e. the well-established national and most prestigious “Grande Écoles”, are opposed to “Petite Porte”-institutions, i.e. less renowned, regional schools and educational institutions, and institutions with a high degree of autonomy are opposed to institutions with little autonomy.

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2 This article is to a large extent based on Hjellbrekke and Korsnes 2005; Hjellbrekke, Le Roux, Korsnes, Lebaron, Rosenlund and Rouanet 2007, Hjellbrekke and Korsnes 2009, 2010, 2013 and Denord, Hjellbrekke, Korsnes, Lebaron and Le Roux 2011.
The institutional dividing lines are thus also clearly rooted in more general capital structures and oppositions. Furthermore, the oppositions in the global field of educational institutions are not only retrievable in the subfield of elite institutions, but also display clear similarities to oppositions between the same institutions in the field of power. In this way, a structural homology between the field of French elite educational institutions and the field of power is unveiled. Not only do agents with high volumes of inherited capital and parents with positions in the field of power exhibit a clear tendency to orient themselves in the direction of homologically placed institutions in the field of Grandes Écoles; they also orient themselves in the direction of final positions close to their positions of departure (i.e. their parents’ positions) in the social space and in the field of power. Agents with high volumes of inherited cultural capital less often seek positions close to the economic pole of the field of power, whereas agents in the dominating sectors of this field give less priority to intellectual and cultural "temptations" (Bourdieu 1989: 234–235).

Comparing the Incomparable?

In Bourdieu’s work the hierarchical relations internal to, but also between, different fields are often emphasized (e.g. Bourdieu 1991). The positions of the persons in the field of power can therefore be identified in three different and multidimensional capital hierarchies. Firstly, as already pointed at, they can be localized in the strongest capital areas of the social space. Secondly, the persons in the field of power take positions in the field by virtue of having dominating positions in their respective fields, e.g. dominating positions in the political, academic or the religious field. They therefore also belong to the strongest capital groupings in their respective fields. And thirdly, there is also a capital hierarchy internally in the field of power, with its own hierarchy between dominating positions.

Struggles in the field of power may also be about the power relations between different fields: E.g. to what extent should it be up to academic milieus themselves to decide their professional priorities, their own principles of government and organisational forms, and to what degree should this be decided by other actors, e.g. political and/or economic actors? And finally, mechanisms of selection and stratification will most certainly vary; some fields and some areas of the field of power will be more open to social mobility than others. The analysis must also search to unveil such patterns, oppositions and barriers. All field construction must therefore necessarily be historically founded.

Questions about what types of capital are relevant to the construction of this field, and what indicators should be chosen, again actualize the question of how such (more or less) implicit cross-national comparisons may be conducted. Pushed to its extreme, one may argue that realizing Bourdieu’s theoretical program, one must open up for “comparing the incomparable” (Maurice 1989; Korsnes 1996); the phenomena one studies may be at different analytical levels, at different dimensions, scales etc. Even if the existence of elites is a universal phenomenon, certain
elite positions, as e.g. “senior civil servants”, “members of parliament”, “high court judges”, do not necessarily refer to identical entities in different states. Their relations to and distances to other elite positions both can and will vary, as may typical “trajectories” leading to such positions, the structures of position specific habituses, the worth of particular types of capital and combinations of capitals.

In comparative studies where the concept of space is central, confusing the geographical space with the space one is studying represents a particular risk in this respect, and in more than one way. Contemporary popular, but fuzzy and unspecified concepts and terms like ‘transnational space’ and ‘methodological nationalism’ may serve as such examples. Both are based on an implicit critique of the nation state as a non-sufficient and unfortunate geographically restricted entity in analysis of phenomena in the late modern, globalized society. In both cases, one risks, however, to reproduce a nationalistic understanding of the nation state (see Chernilo 2006), and to confuse ‘nation’ as an explanatory framework with nation as an explanatory factor. National constellations do not represent an alternative factor of explanation, but on the contrary an analytical tool in searching for explanations that represent alternatives to universal, convergence-oriented explanations (Korsnes 1996). If the nation state is of analytical relevance, it is not because it constitutes a specified unit of space, or because it may be perceived as a basis of imaginary social communities (Taylor 2004), but because it is a suitable framework for studying how the interplay of, what Arndt Sorge calls, universal and societal-specific factors generates differences and similarities between two or more analytical units (Sorge 1995).

The risk of making the concept of space as an analytical entity synonymous with the concept of space as a geographical entity, or a statistical one for that matter, is also actualized in several other ways, e.g. in comparisons between two cities or regions. From a purely technical point of view it may be a sensible strategy to construct two different solutions and then compare them. But from an epistemological and analytical point of view one must be aware that what one then often compares is not two different spaces or fields, but rather regional (and statistical) variations over the same space or field.

Lastly, and perhaps particularly connecting to the foregoing point, one cannot infer that the lines of divisions and oppositions one has succeeded in identifying by constructing a statistically defined space of capital oppositions between positions are also real lines of division and oppositions. As repeatedly pointed out by Bourdieu, there is an important difference between theoretical classes, or classes on paper, and real classes (Bourdieu 1987). This is certainly also valid for studies of elites. Both Robert Michels (1949) and C. Wright Mills (1956) stressed that “the higher circles” may be well integrated, partly overlapping, deeply split up, divided in several groupings etc. The positions that are close to each other in the field of power must therefore be considered as probable groupings; groupings that in certain situations will more easily think of themselves as, and therefore may more easily mobilize and be mobilized as, a grouping in spite of internal lines of division.
Avoiding “Looking for France in Norway”: The Centrality of Social Capital

To take for granted that the oppositions Bourdieu found in France also structure the Norwegian field of power would for all of the above reasons therefore be highly problematic. It would imply a preconstruction of the kind that Bourdieu relentlessly warned against, while at the same time ignoring the fundamental social-scientific separation between theoretical and empirical generalizations. It would also mean that historical-institutional patterns are disregarded. The educational domain, for instance, is clearly structured in different ways in the different states; Norway and the other Scandinavian countries do not have such a cultivated system of Grandes Écoles as France has. In the economic domain, there are also important differences between the Nordic countries. Whereas the industrial and financial bourgeoisie historically has played an important role in Sweden, these groupings have been much weaker in shaping Norwegian capitalist’ history.

Related to this, one cannot take it for granted that economic and cultural capital will automatically constitute opposite poles in the Norwegian, Danish or Swedish field of power. In fact, Bourdieu was open to the possibility that other types of capital, for instance political capital, could both constitute important principles of differentiation and be part of systematic capital oppositions, as e.g. between political and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1994: 31–35). And as shown by Michael Hartmann in his works on elites (Hartmann 2006, 2007), the extent of social mobility and circulation between sectors clearly differs between European states. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, and as emphasized by Loïc Waquant (1996; xv), Bourdieu’s study offers a systematic research program of relevance to the analysis of any national field of power:

Distinguishing the (specific) empirical findings from the (general) theoretical model contained in The State Nobility suggests an agenda for a comparative, genetic and structural sociology of national fields of power that would, for each society, catalogue efficient forms of capital, specify the social and historical determinants of their degree of differentiation, distance and antagonisms, and evaluate the part played by the system of elite schools (or functionally equivalent institutions) in regulating the relations they entertain.

In the Norwegian case, this is further complicated by the tripolar system of industrial relations; a national, coordinating system for wage negotiations and governmental policies which includes representatives from the trade unions, the managerial associations and also from governmental bodies. In the Norwegian field of power, this institutionalized system “occupies” a highly central position, and constitutes a kind of “field within the field”. To have strong contacts to this system may therefore yield important “external” returns. But the value of these contacts will also depend on their capacity to affect outcomes and processes within the system itself. In terms of social capital, to be a member of, or to have strong connections to the
tripartite system is therefore also to belong to the field’s “core of the core” (Denord et al. 2011).

For these reasons, and because of the lacking system of elite institutions of higher education, both the volume and the composition of social capital might be more important in the construction of the Norwegian case than they are in the analyses of others. Furthermore, it necessitates an analysis of social capital in its institutionalised state, i.e. formalised and regular contact patterns and meetings between members in formal positions in politics, governmental bodies, public and private companies etc. This particular institutionalised system of coordination between positions in the field testifies to why one should avoid “looking for France in Norway” when constructing the Norwegian field of power.

Uncovering a Tri-Polar Field Structure: Challenges When Working with Positional Data

In elite studies three perspectives have dominated. Adherents of the positional method identify the elite on the basis of formal top positions in a selection of sectors. The demarcation criteria for including a person in the elite or not is whether the person holds a position in formal power structures. This procedure has been used both in Norwegian (Gulbrandsen et al. 2002), Danish (Christiansen et al. 2001), Swedish (SOU 1990) and German elite studies (Bürklin and Rebenstorf 1997). When taking the reputational method as point of departure it is others’ opinions that are used as mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, and a selection of people are asked who they think belong to the elite. Finally, the decisional method identifies the elite by first selecting a set of important issues, and thereafter finding out who had the power to decide or influence the outcome of the issues.

All these methods have their shortcomings and problems, and none of them can be combined with a field analysis in a straightforward way. The reputational method is based on an assumption that those who really have power are also those that have a reputation for having power, which we know is not always the case. If the decisional method is applied, one first has to distinguish which cases are best suited to identifying the real power holders, and thereafter find out who actually influences the outcome of the case. Using the positional method and institutional criteria when doing the selection, it is difficult to include “éminences grises” and “hidden players” who in many cases have much more real power than those who “rubber-stamp” decisions in formal positions. In addition, persons with substantial volumes of capital and who undoubtedly can exert power in their respective fields, are excluded as long as they do not also have formal assignments. The data we had access to stemmed from “The Leadership Survey 2000” of the Norwegian Report of Power and Democracy (Gulbrandsen et al. 2002), which comprises 1710 persons who in 2000/2001 all held formal assignments and were in leading positions in 10 different sectors, and will necessarily have some of the same shortcomings.
Ideally, in a field analysis, one should also include artists, authors, scientists, former politicians etc., who, even if they do not hold formal positions in political parties, universities, cultural organisations or publishing houses, are still powerful agents in their respective fields. These agents were, however, not included in our sample. There were also limitations when it comes to the exhaustiveness of the set of variables. Firstly, we did not have access to information about from where a respondent holds a higher or lower educational degree. Oppositions between higher educational institutions could therefore not be analysed. Furthermore, data on what Bourdieu (1994) coined ‘political capital’ were scarce. Nor did we have information about memberships in exclusive clubs and associations, or relational data which could have permitted a fine grained analysis of interpersonal networks in the field. In these cases, we had to rely on proxies, e.g. number of years in politics, and variables on regular and institutionalized contacts through formal meetings.

Even so, an MCA of 31 variables (see Le Roux and Rouanet 2010; Hjellbrekke 2018), grouped into five types of capital indicators – economic capital, personal and inherited cultural capital, personal social capital, inherited social capital and field trajectory – uncovered a distinct tripolar structure, with the first axis as a volume axis for economic capital, the second axis as a structure axis describing an opposition between high volumes of cultural and inherited social capital vs high volumes of political capital (an established vs newcomers-opposition) and the third axis as an opposition between high volumes of social capital vs. high volumes of educational or cultural capital. Summed up, in the Norwegian field of power, managerial positions stand in opposition to positions in politics, higher civil service, research, culture and the judicial positions along axis 1, political positions in opposition to positions in research and in the church along axis 2, and judicial positions in opposition to political positions along axis 3 (see Hjellbrekke et al. 2007 for further details).

While these results cannot be interpreted as being empirically identical to Bourdieu and de St.Martin’s findings from France in the 1970s, even so we interpret them as supporting the homology thesis; that field oppositions are structured by a set of common fundamental principles, i.e. oppositions between the most important forms of capital in a given society, and according to the same social logic. The same principle applies to comparisons between the Norwegian field of power and its subfields. One cannot expect the oppositions to be identical, but the homology thesis implies that they display structural similarities, and that they are case specific variations of a common, hierarchizing field logic. In the Norwegian case, the opposition between “established” and “newcomers”, i.e. the 2nd axis in the global field, is present in all the subfields in the field of power (see Hjellbrekke and Korsnes 2019). Whereas “the established” are likely to have valuable family connections in, and also familiarity with, the field logic, “the newcomers” are not. Also for this reason, in the more detailed investigation of the field’s subgroups, particular attention had to be given to inherited and personal social capital volumes and structures.
Investigating Social Capital Structures

In the wide literature on social capital, Ponthieux (2009) correctly identifies three dominating conceptualisations (see also Portes 1998):

- James Coleman’s approach, with its focus on social integration, coordination and normative reciprocity (Coleman 1988, 1990), in part adopted by Robert Putnam in his communitarian approach (Putnam 1993, 1995)
- The social network approach, as exemplified in Nan Lin’s (Lin 2001) and Ronald S. Burt’s (1992) research, with its emphasis on network access to resources and assets,
- The Bourdiesian approach, which we favour, is in part network oriented, but with an explicit emphasis on how social capital is related to the other forms of capital, on its hierarchizing capacity, and on the capital type’s historical and symbolic dimension. Like economic and cultural capital, social capital can be inherited, not least through institutionalized networks of recognition. (Bourdieu 1986: 248/249).

Unfortunately, the dataset had no variables on direct relations between the individuals in the sample, so in order to analyse social capital relations in the Norwegian field of power we had to rely on proxy indicators, and measure the volume and the structure of the agents’ social capital assets through two sets of variables:

- Variables on the respondents’ institutionalized and regular patterns of contacts with members of various sectors in the field.
- Variables on board memberships in the parental generation, on board memberships held by the respondent and by the respondent’s partner

In this way, two forms of social capital segmentation could be studied;

- Institutionalized segmentation in the field itself,
- Intergenerationalized segmentation and segmentation through homogamy patterns, i.e. a mainly field external segmentation, but with a high degree of relevance for the oppositions in the field.

The analysis of the distribution of institutionalized social capital revealed a strong correlation between the number of sectors an individual had contacts to, and the degree of intermediarity of the same individual. To have formalized contacts to a large number of sectors thus increases the probability to act as a mediator or negotiator, not at least between well-connected individuals and more socially isolated individuals, understood as individuals with more restricted networks (see Denord et al. 2011 for further details). But within this seemingly unidimensional hierarchy, clear differences and subgroups could be found. Most importantly, a cluster a “tripartites”, with strong contacts to CEOs, managerial associations, trade unions and organizations was identified. In the Norwegian field of power, this subgroup, which is centered around economic and industrial power, constitutes “the core of the core”.

But given the recurring opposition between “inheritors” and “newcomers”, an investigation of social capital structures also necessitates an analysis of degree of inheritance, and also of social closure through homogamy. In both cases, this can also be seen as indicators of dynasty formation; one inter-generational and the other intra-generational. A latent class analysis (McCutcheon 1987) of the relations between the respondents’ board memberships and the parents’ board memberships, and thereafter of the relations between respondents’ and their partners’ board memberships, identify two important subgroups (Hjellbrekke and Korsnes 2005). In the first case, a group of 20% can be defined as “social capital inheritors”. They have not only inherited their parents’ networks, but in many cases also their positions in the field of power. Within this cluster, social closure is further strengthened through their partner structures. A small group (8% of the total sample) combines high levels of personal social capital with similarly high social capital volumes for their partners.

In this respect, they constitute a group of “dynastic insiders”. Not only have valuable network resources been successfully transferred between the generations, but in the present generation, these dynastic networks have also been expanded and become more integrated through marriage and cohabitation structures.

**Concluding Comments**

To our knowledge, the study of the Norwegian field of power was the first where Bourdieu’s theory of the field of power was applied to a case outside of France. But, as outlined above, the Bourdieusian approach is not one that mechanically and simplistically can be applied in a variable-by-variable comparison. Instead, it necessitates a detailed and careful construction of the two or more spaces that are to be compared. When constructing these spaces, indicators of the most important forms of capital in the respective societies must be included, and this will almost necessarily result in case specific structural variations. Constructing and comparing fields of power entailed a series of challenges, of which we have only addressed a few in this chapter.

As Amable (2005) has shown in his empirical analyses of varieties of capitalism, where five different types of capitalism are identified, there are strong, and even obvious reasons to believe that also the structures, oppositions and trajectories in fields of power will vary from one case to the next. For instance, whereas intersectorial circulation, or “pantouflage”, in France is strongly connected to the “grandes écoles”-system, we have argued (Hjellbrekke and Korsnes 2009) that “pantouflage à la norvégienne” primarily depends on the agents’ volume and composition of political capital. And even though the opposition between “established” and “newcomers” is found in both countries, it is not identical. Furthermore, internally in the Norwegian field of power, it is also an opposition that displays structural variations between the subfields.
But once again, these differences and variations do not imply a refutation of the more general theory of the field of power, as some authors seem to claim, but are rather a demonstration of the Bourdieusian framework’s ability to analyse how the relations between universal and societal factors (Sorge 1995) play out between and within cases, temporalities and locations. In our opinion, this should be considered a major strength for any research program.

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