Bourdieu and Sociological Biography: The Case of Vincent van Gogh’s Choice of Profession

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Abstract
Pierre Bourdieu’s conceptual framework offers a productive means of making sense of statistical regularities and correspondences. When it comes to explaining the intricacies of individual biographies, however, including something as seemingly personal as one’s choice of occupation, Bourdieu offers only a starting point in need of elaboration. Above all, there is a need to pay greater attention to the multiplicity of fields in which individuals are situated and the interplay between them in shaping desires and strategies. These include class, family relations and, in some cases, employment-based fields such as art, religion or specific organisations. To demonstrate the argument, this article takes as a case study the trajectory of Vincent van Gogh, highlighting the ongoing interaction between class, family and other fields in generating his eventual decision to become an artist.

Keywords
art, Bourdieu, fields, sociological biography, Vincent van Gogh

Introduction
At first glance, Pierre Bourdieu’s vastly influential framework might seem to fulfil Mills’ (1970) hope that sociology should connect social structure and individual biography. Yet there is an imbalance. It undoubtedly offers a fruitful means of making sense of statistical regularities and correspondences, especially in relation to the nexus between class, taste, educational inequality, social (im)mobility and entry into and progression within the professions. Probabilities of access to university or elite occupational fields by class
background, for example, are readily explicable in terms of practical perceptions of the possible, likely or desirable given one’s resources and adapted tastes (see, for example, Friedman and Laurison, 2019; Reay et al., 2005). But what about the complexities of individual biographies – why, for example, an individual followed one specific educational pathway, entered into one specific profession and possibly ‘changed their minds’ over time? These are part and parcel of sociology’s remit too. Specificity is still rooted in social relations, after all, and disentangling its genesis helps explain not just variation within and deviation from typical pathways but the origins of singular interventions by individuals – a Mozart or Manet, for example – with long-lasting impact on cultural production, evaluation and consumption (Gingras, 2000). On this, however, Bourdieu offers only a starting point.

In this article I make the case that the sociological analysis of biographies – that is, explaining the specific course of a life, and the desires and choices guiding it, with reference to social structures – can usefully begin with but must go beyond Bourdieu’s typical orientation. This is because individuals are more multifaceted than he generally allowed. As a case study I will take Vincent van Gogh and, more precisely, his eventual decision to pursue art as a vocation. As we will see, there is no escaping the basic conditions of possibility for his choices and, indeed, the principle of their unity: his class origin and trajectory in the Netherlands of the 19th century and the specific tastes and interests they generated. There is also, however, everything to suggest that his rise and decline in, and (attempted) entry into and departure from, different professions over the course of his life was entwined with his various quests for love – that is to say, his position and strategies within his family relations understood as a social structure characterised by domination and striving. This conclusion, as I will explore in the closing discussion, bears consequences for sociological analysis of biographies beyond the case in question. First, however, I will adumbrate Bourdieu’s modus operandi and its limitations.

**From One Field to Many**

The key elements of Bourdieu’s framework, broadly summarised, include: (1) his focus on dispositions or practical sense (habitus) rather than rational calculation; (2) his notion of capital, denoting properties and possessions that operate as resources because they are misrecognised as valuable; and (3) his concept of field, as a system of relations between people defined by possession of different amounts and types of capital and providing the context for practical sense. Each field bears its own doxa, as the taken-for-granted sense of ‘what is done’ within the field, and illusio, which refers to the individual’s socialised desire for the specific forms of capital underpinning their strategies of accumulation, conversion, conservation or subversion within the field. The major forms of capital in capitalist social orders, forming the field of class relations or ‘social space’, are economic capital (money), cultural capital (education) and social capital (advantageous networks and connections), but Bourdieu (1971, 1984, 1996, 2005) also identified forms of capital, and thus fields, with relative autonomy from the stakes and struggles of the social space, including the artistic field, the religious field and the field of business.

Alongside his underlying concern with the broad effects of class, Bourdieu was interested primarily in the general structure and transformation over time of specific fields.
He did, however, examine individual cases in order to make sense of the symbolic revolutions they wrought within their respective fields. Gustave Flaubert and Édouard Manet, for example, were fundamental in establishing and defining the relative autonomy of the French literary and artistic fields, respectively, while Martin Heidegger induced a conservative revolution within the German field of philosophy (Bourdieu, 1990a, 1993, 1996, 2017). More than that, though, Bourdieu believed his conceptual toolkit could explain individuality per se; that is, the apparent biographical specificities of not just prominent historical figures but of ordinary people struggling through their education, employment and so on (see esp. Bourdieu, 1990b, 2000a; Bourdieu et al., 1999: 618). The unifying orientation was attention to individual location and trajectory within the social space and/or occupational field in question and, as context for that, the structural form and mutation of both, the impact of the proliferation and devaluation of schooling and credentials from the 19th century onwards being a recurrent theme.

When it came specifically to intellectuals or cultural producers, Bourdieu made clear that his framework offered analytical advances over rival perspectives (e.g. Bourdieu, 1996: 187ff.). It undermined the voluntaristic finalism of Sartre’s ‘original project’ by highlighting the structural context and practical imperatives framing decisions; it challenged the reductionism of Marxism by flagging the relative autonomy of field struggles from class; and it superseded the (post-)structuralist reading of symbolic forms by grounding the latter in the practices and interests of socially situated agents. It also apparently clashed with Becker’s (2008) interactionist ‘art worlds’ perspective by underscoring the structural (im)possibilities and desires informing interpersonal relations and networks. Others have since applied his perspective successfully to analyse the structure of specific cultural fields and the fates or practices of individuals within them (e.g. Anheier et al., 1995; Casanova, 2004; Grenfell and Hardy, 2007).

For some time now, however, Lahire (2002, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2019) has consistently and forcefully made the case that Bourdieu’s framework is limited when it comes to analysing sociologically the biographies and practices of individuals, whether they be high-profile cultural producers or ordinary citizens. Fields may be part of the picture, but they are not enough on their own; to understand why someone does or decides what they do, we also need to factor in that individual’s past and present implication in multiple social structures, including family relations, schooling, workplaces, social networks and so on. Dispositions and desires are forged in myriad contexts and may clash or be transferable from one context to the other to varying degrees. Lahire’s point concords with research influenced by Bourdieu that emphasises the specific effects of schooling and family relations in shaping students’ decisions and refracting the effects of class (e.g. Reay, 1998; Reay et al., 2005) as well as the argument among network theorists that interactive relations and connections matter for informing ideas, interests and projects (Bottero and Crossley, 2011).

Bourdieu did acknowledge many of these factors, including the role of intra-familial conflicts (e.g. Bourdieu, 1999: 507–513), specificity of social networks (e.g. Bourdieu, 2017: 303–319) and multiple field membership (esp. Bourdieu, 2000a). Still, he gave them only passing mention or fleeting attention and expended little energy on exploring their logical consequences or conceptual articulation. He preferred instead to focus on ‘epistemic individuals’ – individuals with only their properties relevant to the field in
focus isolated – and leave ‘empirical individuals’ – individuals in their full complexity – to one side (Bourdieu, 1988: 21ff.). Even Bourdieu, however, recognised the desirability of reconciling the two, and Lahire’s argument is that multiplicity is no rare occurrence of minor import but fundamental to constructing a sufficiently nuanced sociological model of individual preferences and practice. It is impossible to understand Franz Kafka’s life choices or literary contribution, for example, without understanding his relation to his father, to his paid employment and to women (Lahire, 2010). More generally, why an individual chooses one specific educational avenue over others, or one particular occupation over others, and not just the broad type of avenue or occupation, is irreducible to class background alone (or even in conjunction with gender) but surely depends on all kinds of concrete models and pressures experienced within the family, the school, the media, the workplace and so on. Leaving those beyond the scope of sociological construction is to needlessly attenuate the discipline’s explanatory capacities, not least because in many cases the social production and transformation (strengthening, weakening, rechanneling) of illusio for specific fields is in question.

The conceptual elaborations or additions offered by sympathetic critics of Bourdieu, however, are problematic. Attention to networks and worlds, in dialectical interplay with fields, may well be beneficial, as Bottero and Crossley (2011) propose, yet Lahire concocts a medley of new tools that are highly questionable on closer inspection (Atkinson, 2021) while the research on school/family effects posits the notion of a school/family ‘habitus’ that obscures more than it reveals (Atkinson, 2011). Both fail to take advantage of Bourdieu’s (1998) brief remark that family relations themselves function as a field with its own doxa (or ‘family spirit’), illusio and struggles. This field is clearly fundamental in not only endowing the capitals enabling access to different fields but generating and sustaining the desire to enter a specific employment-based field such as art or religion (see Atkinson, 2016). Its salience does not end, there, however, since individuals do not leave their familial field – its conditioning effects are not confined to childhood – but are subject to its imperatives and possibilities throughout the life course in competition or harmony with the imperatives and possibilities of other fields, including the social space, an occupational field (e.g. art, religion, etc.) or even an employing organisation as a field (Bourdieu, 2005). The interplay of fields in an individual life is not limited to the triad of class–work–family, moreover: different employment-based fields may battle for interest or attention, for example, or failure in one may bleed into or prompt a turn to another as consolation (Atkinson, 2022). Bourdieu (2000a) even posited a term for articulating an individual’s concurrent implication in multiple relatively autonomous fields: the ‘social surface’. He made nothing of it, but the social surface, capturing the combination of field forces in forming dispositions, interests, desires and possibilities, may in fact be fundamental for explaining sociologically the twists and turns of individual biographies.

**Case Study: Vincent van Gogh**

Vincent van Gogh offers a case in point. Van Gogh’s biography is significant not only because his artistic contribution, as a vital step into post-Impressionism, was fundamental to the development of western art in the 20th century, and not only because his
trajectory has attracted relatively few sociologically minded investigations (key exceptions being Heinich, 1996; Silverman, 2000), but also because his decision to become an artist came late in life after several failed ventures and has been subject to multiple and conflicting interpretations among psychologists and art historians (see Welsh-Ovcharov, 1974).

Constructing his biography sociologically will require vigilant reading of two sources. The first is the plethora of memoirs, biographies and scholarly treatments of the painter; the second is van Gogh’s copious letters to friends and relatives (especially his brother, Theo).¹ Neither source should be taken at face value; both are framed by the interests of their authors. In the case of academic or family-penned biographies these take the form of disciplinary or familial strategies and are prone to exhibit what Bourdieu (2000a) called the ‘biographical illusion’, or constant seeking in the details of a life the ‘clues’ that they would arrive at their eventual destiny – in this instance, that van Gogh would become an artist. As for van Gogh’s letters, the specific message or self-image that van Gogh was trying to present, and the very function of sending the letters, must be borne in mind.

Social Origin and Initial Illusio

We begin with van Gogh’s earliest social relations. The family spirit, or the doxa ruling the family field, was not only thoroughly bourgeois but a confluence of three intertwined threads: religion, art and art trading.² His father was a Protestant pastor, descended from a line of magistrates, lawyers, artists and clergymen (his own father had been a minister and expected one of his children to follow him into the Church), and three of his brothers were involved in the art trade. Van Gogh’s mother, who never worked, was the daughter of a reputed bookbinder and had a brother who was an artist and a brother-in-law who was a theologian. Her family friends included famed artists on the Dutch scene and she and her sisters were encouraged to take up music and art as appropriate pastimes for young women of the bourgeoisie.

Thus, the early familial milieu was one in which religion and art were ever-present, not only as the substance of pleasurable domestic moments and parental recognition in the form of bible readings, prayer meetings and the constant encouragement and praise of artistic pursuits (with van Gogh’s early pictures modelled on his mother’s) but as possible and desirable – if not thoroughly ‘normal’ – vocations. Both religion and art, moreover, provided vehicles for appreciation of something else: nature. Romanticism was in full swing – so the family friends and paintings typically stocked at family art galleries were all part of the movement – and had been embraced by the Protestant Dutch clergy, including van Gogh’s father, as an aid to delivering the messages of God. Poems and pictures were mobilised to demonstrate the glory of God – to marvel at nature’s beauty was, in other words, a form of religious awe and, indeed, worship.

The blend of religion, nature and art was given practical pertinence by the fact that van Gogh’s father had been assigned to a rural village: the heath, hills, streams, woodland and peasants of Romantic art were all around and the subject of paternal musings and marvels as van Gogh and his father walked the lanes and fields of the parish. Yet herein lies another key feature of van Gogh’s social origin: his father’s consignment to
the parish, which was predominantly Catholic, was a sign of his dominated position in the religious field and, indeed, his downward trajectory relative to his own esteemed father—a product, it seems of a lack of oratorical skill as well as alignment with a declining theological school in the religious field. Thus, both of van Gogh’s parents—his mother, after all, had seemingly married down—pursued a number of strategies of re-establishment. These included constant exhortations that their children be ‘clever’ and ‘respectable’, that they cultivate good social connections and dress smartly so that ‘people see a gentleman when they look at you’ (Naifeh and Smith, 2013: 33). Above all, however, it included the investment of economic capital—which was relatively scarce given the modest family income—in the cultivation of cultural capital: Vincent van Gogh was, from 11 years old, sent to boarding schools.

Although everything seems to indicate that van Gogh did well academically at school, and that an orientation towards nature and its workers as artistic inspiration and God’s glory was consolidated by his art teacher there, his exile from the domestic milieu was a critical moment. He would later express this in a sense of being forsaken, like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (L090, L076), and thereafter he became solitary and withdrawn, increasingly quiet and aloof from his family during vacations, often venturing out on his own into the countryside to collect beetles, birds and flowers. By contrast, his brother Theo, with whom van Gogh had always been close, was home-schooled and, later, day-schooled, remaining within the family milieu, so van Gogh was alone in his exile and his sense of being forsaken. Suddenly, when he was just 15 years old, he left school early and returned to the parental home for a year—not because of money concerns, since his family could afford the fees, and not because of scholastic failure, since his performance was good, so it must have been an active decision. Was it a bid to win back the position he felt he had lost in the familial field, especially relative to his younger siblings at home, while sent away? In any case, in failing to embody the familial hopes of re-ascent via schooling, van Gogh’s parents mobilised a different means to halt their intergenerational decline: social capital. Van Gogh was sent to work for his uncle Cent in the art trade.

Uncle Cent was a partner in Goupil and Co, an art dealership with its own galleries and production facilities based in Holland and France. As a large, successful and profitable dealership it undoubtedly occupied a dominant position in the field of dealerships at the time, itself a sub-field of the economic field, but there is a sense in which the firm itself functioned as a field in which authority and legitimacy as a decision-maker regarding the operations and strategies of the firm are at stake and depend on a number of resources, some of them heteronomous (like social capital and cultural capital) but some of them firm-specific, like experience and information regarding the firm’s staff and operations (Bourdieu, 2005). When van Gogh entered the dealership in the Hague, then, he had the social capital of association with his uncle and the embodied cultural capital from his schooling, but was yet to acquire the firm-specific powers capable of securing legitimacy within the firm and as an agent in the higher-order field.

Everything would seem to suggest that van Gogh, given his early sensitisation to art and art trade in the family milieu, quickly developed an illusio appropriate to the field and success within the firm: he talked of the ‘pleasure’ it brought, of Goupil and Co being a ‘fine firm’ breeding ‘enthusiasm’, and wrote excitedly about possible sales
opportunities; he steadily began extending his artistic knowledge and his intra-firm resources by visiting galleries, reading trade literature, acquiring bookkeeping skills and developing good relations with his manager (see L002 through L006). The strategies repaid: his duties expanded to dealing with important clients and he was given a pay rise and bonus. However, his relocation to the Hague and distance from the domestic milieu, and the tokens of recognition to be found there, once again bred a profound homesickness and nostalgia for past family moments as well as a rather solitary and unsociable lifestyle. This was reinforced by a visit from Theo that solidified their friendship – spurring the regular and intense exchange of letters that would continue until van Gogh died – and made van Gogh miserable when it ended, compensated only a little by frequent contact and very warm relations with wider family living in the Hague at the time.

Those compensations were lost, however, when van Gogh was transferred to the newly opened London branch of Goupil and Co as part of the firm’s plans for international expansion (on van Gogh in London, see Bailey, 1990; Hulsker, 1990). His commitment to the firm and its success did not dampen, and nor did his efforts to accumulate and display mastery of the workings of the art trade and Goupil and Co, as evidenced by letters sent to Theo expressing his ‘delight’ at ‘handsome profits’ brought from photographic reproductions, commentating on what does and does not sell in England, offering his views on how to improve the London branch’s performance, indicating his voracious appetite for art – especially that devoted to Romantic and Realist evocations of nature – and suggesting he was maintaining good relations with his new manager (L015, L017). He was rewarded with another pay rise and caught the eye of Adolphe Goupil himself, the namesake of the firm, who noted his ‘ambition’ (Naifeh and Smith, 2013: 91 n207). Yet his letters also reveal his loneliness and nostalgia for the past; his yearning to be back at home with his brother and his family – a sentiment exacerbated by his very warm relations with his family, mediated by letters, at this point.

Then disaster struck. Van Gogh had moved into a new house with cheaper rent, lodging with a widow and her 19-year-old daughter. He was happy at first, since he seemingly found a family environment to compensate for the loss of his own. Biographers are split on what exactly happened next, but a common argument is that van Gogh fell in love with the daughter, who spurned his advances. Whatever did happen, van Gogh left the household under a storm cloud and became depressed and withdrawn. His commitment to the firm was undented, but his melancholy demeanour affected his relations with customers. Not only that, but van Gogh was, at the same time, becoming more assertive of what counted as good art or not with customers, openly criticising Goupil’s classicist stock and the tastes of the consuming public and championing, instead, the Realism of the Barbizon painters chiming with his own taste (and nostalgia) for quotidian bucolic life (Bailey, 1990: 67–69). He was, in other words, becoming subversive within the field. The result was a transfer to Paris, just before a major exhibition in London, much to his crushing disappointment: his steady ascent in the field had been halted.

Expulsion from the Field and Genesis of a New Illusio

Van Gogh’s letters from Paris reveal a continuing love of art as well as a continuing yearning to be with his family – evidenced not least by his petition to have Theo, who
had also begun working for Goupil and Co, transferred to the Paris branch (see L030, L034). They also, however, reveal an increasingly religious orientation, with exhortations to attend church and frequent quotes from the Bible unlike anything seen before, and, moreover, a religious orientation of a specific kind – one that finds glory and piety in sorrow, melancholy, humbleness, adversity and hope (see especially L035, L036, L038, L042, L046, L055, L069). His most repeated mantra, taken from Corinthians, was that one should always be ‘sorrowful, yet always rejoicing’. In all likelihood this served as a balm for his failures, both in love and at work, and a means of transforming his misery into a virtue. Why it was this balm and not another, of course, is linked to the van Gogh family spirit, and it is telling that this renewed religious sentiment in van Gogh’s letters dovetails with profound idealisation of his father and his advice. It is as if one strand of the family spirit, embodied in his father, is alleviating the failures attached to another, embodied in uncle Cent.

Not long after, however, the religious orientation began to frame and overpower van Gogh’s interest in art, the art trade and nature. ‘Feeling, even a fine feeling, for the beauties of nature’, he wrote, seemingly responding to a prompt by Theo on the relationship between appreciating nature and religious sentiment, ‘isn’t the same as religious feeling, although I believe that the two are closely connected. The same is true of a feeling for art. Don’t give in to that too much either’ (L049, emphasis in original). His descriptions of his work in Paris gradually became evermore shrouded in resigned biblical justifications, as something that must be done not for its own sake but as a duty of the pious – his life was ora et labora (prayer and work), and at the gallery ‘I simply do whatever the hand finds to do’, with that being ‘our work our whole life, old boy, may I do it with all my might’ (L050, L055). It became clear that he took no pleasure in his work, that he was considering resigning, that he strongly disliked the ethos of bargaining with customers and foisting ‘bad’ art on people for the sake of sales – forms of dishonesty at odds with his new-found Christian morality – and that he was zealous in his promotion of paintings that suited his Romantic and Realist tastes (now valorised for their religious connotations) but sold poorly.5 His illusio had plainly dwindled, beaten down by his religious fervour, and his subversive practice within Goupil, in the words of the director, ‘set a bad example to the others’ (L377). At the start of 1876, therefore, Vincent van Gogh – subject of an extreme, but extremely effective, conservation strategy at the disposal of the dominant within a firm as a field – was sacked and ceased to be an effective player within the firm.

Van Gogh’s parents were horrified and crushed – their eldest son had seemingly thrown away their chances of re-establishment, and their hopes and desires were now transferred fully on to Theo instead: ‘Now [that] the oldest has rocked the boat, we hope all the more that the second will steer a steady course’, wrote his mother, ‘You shall and must be our joy and honour! We cannot do without it’ (L065 n2; Stolwijk, 1999: 29–30). Not only had he been expelled from one field but, because this expulsion clearly stalled familial re-ascent in the social space, his position now deteriorated in another.

Soon enough, however, a new desire was born: van Gogh wished to become a preacher. This was a translation of his religious enthusiasm, originally a consolation for his failures, into a sense of a calling. He now longed ‘that a way be found for me to devote my life, more so than is now the case, to the service of Him and the gospel’ (L106). This budding desire was explicitly yoked to the hope that his experience of
‘failure’, ‘reproaches’ and ‘downcastness’ – that is, his downward trajectory in all the fields he valued, its accompanying symbolic violence and their emotional fallout – ‘might be taken away’ by a new source of potential recognition (L106). Especially attractive was the possibility of providing spiritual comfort to the poor, the humble and the downtrodden – people who, like van Gogh, had experienced domination and denigration, albeit within a different structural space. Yet this was not all. Van Gogh’s pursuit of preaching was also to be a means of regaining familial favour (L109). He rather self-deceptively believed that in becoming a preacher he would be fulfilling his father’s long-held desires: ‘I know that his heart is burning within him that something might happen so that I could give myself over not only almost but altogether to following Him, Pa always hoped I would do so’ (L109). More than this, in fact, van Gogh justified his longings and plans by situating them within the reproductive trajectory of the family:

In our family, which is indeed a Christian family in the full sense of the word, there has always been a minister of the gospel as far back as one can see, from generation to generation. Why should that voice not be heard in this and in following generations? Why should a member of that family not now feel himself called to that office and think, with some reason, that he can and must declare himself and seek the means to achieve that goal? It is my prayer and deepest desire that the spirit of my Father and Grandfather may rest upon me, and that it may be given me to be a Christian and a Christian labourer. (L109)

If van Gogh were successful in his strivings, then far from being the failed son open to reproaches he would be the prime realisation of the family spirit.

At the same time, however, van Gogh’s new desires were riddled with a sense of limits born of his capital possession: his lack of institutionalised cultural capital in the form of university qualification barred him from effective participation in the religious field of the time and – as revealed in his applications for specific posts – he knew it (L084, L106). Although his faith made him hopeful, repeated worldly experiences – failed job applications and discouraging advice from clergy – generated an adaptation to his limits: sensing university study to be beyond him, he contented himself with the possibilities of lay preaching or missionary work, especially among the poor and downtrodden who, like him, represented the meek and humble and thus the real embodiments of faith and holiness. Despite his best hopes, however, van Gogh’s new desires did not please his parents, who described his plans for lay preaching or missionary work as ‘foolhardy’, a ‘sheer folly’, ‘not a proper livelihood’ and so on, that is, below the desirable range of positions in the social space (Hulsker, 1990: 40; Naifeh and Smith, 2013: 141–142; L100 n4). They insisted that if their son was so keen on a religious calling, he must undertake the ‘proper’ training. They thus pooled together and invested their economic capital and social capital in the production of cultural capital by tapping family connections and paying for van Gogh to receive instruction preparing him for university entry and life as an agent in the Dutch religious field.

Failed Field Entry

After a promising start, van Gogh hit against the limitations of his capital once again. Leaving school at 15, and immersing himself in the art world for years thereafter, had poorly endowed him with the specific symbolic mastery necessary for successful
manipulation of ancient languages and theological debates. His progress stalled, and he became increasingly despondent, self-chastising and resigned to failure. Making a virtue of necessity, he began to rail against his instruction, seeing it as unnecessary for what he wanted to do: console and uplift the poor, the humble and the downhearted. All he needed, in his view, was a good knowledge of the Bible and its application to the problems faced by ordinary people, as well as adherence to the principles of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* and Thomas à Kempis’ *The Imitation of Christ* (Stein, 1986: 445).

Eventually the family decided that van Gogh could progress no further on this course and that he should instead undertake basic training to become an evangelist. Even then, however, he struggled with and resented the demands for linguistic mastery (Tralbaut, 1969: 58), so the only course open to him — only made possible because of social capital in the form of his father’s recommendation — was to become a lay preacher and catechist. Pursuing his desire to minister to the poor and downtrodden, he headed to the coalmining Borinage region of Belgium. Here, however, he faced the opposite problem to his university training: his schooling, his cultivation and his artistic interests — his level of symbolic mastery and the tastes and orientations it generated — were grossly at odds with the coalminers’ dispositions and outlook. He described them in his letters as ‘ignorant and untaught’, which clashed with his own ‘fine manners’, and the place itself as ‘primitive’ — only the foreman, with whom he became friendly, struck him as ‘far superior to most of them in intellectual development’ — and seemingly admitted that it was a struggle to get on with them and win their trust (L15, L152; Stein, 1986: 46; see also Naifeh and Smith, 2013: 196ff.). They failed to match his construction of humble and downtrodden workers finding salvation in faith, moreover, as they preferred to pursue political solutions — namely socialism and industrial action — to their suffering instead. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the miners and their families were suspicious of van Gogh, though he was known to be highly attentive to the sick, and his sermons were poorly attended. He sought solace by cleaving even closer to Kempis and, perhaps as a kind of condescension strategy, as Bourdieu (1991) would put it, voluntarily approximating (or even surpassing in deprivation) the living conditions of the miners: he ate only dry bread and gruel, neglected his clothes, moved to a run-down shack and slept on planks of wood. This backfired, however: the local church authorities were not only unsatisfied with his lack of ‘talent for speaking’ (which echoes his father’s shortcomings) but expressed their disapproval of his austere lifestyle. When van Gogh responded by defiantly citing Kempis, the authorities considered this use of religious teachings heretical, and he was dismissed. Once again, therefore, his subversive practice — rooted in his London tragedy and family heritage but translated into the acceptable and unacceptable in the Belgian religious field — as well as, or perhaps because of, his lack of requisite masteries saw him barred from the field (which he was barely an active agent in, if at all) by those with sufficient symbolic power to do so.

As a last effort to satisfy his illusio for the religious field, van Gogh mobilised his social capital once again — this time the mediation of an old teacher, who was sympathetic to van Gogh because of a shared interest in art — to secure a post as an assistant to an independent evangelist in a small town nearby. Yet there was no congregation, there were no sermons to give and there were no sick to tend to. Van Gogh became melancholy, confiding that ‘life has gradually become or has seemed much less precious to me’
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(L154), but the real crisis point came in confrontation with his family. His parents had long been communicating disappointment with his trajectory and his bearing, but now his brother Theo, to whom he confided everything, admonished him – or, more precisely, van Gogh perceived Theo to be admonishing him – for not only ‘going downhill’, ‘fading away’ and ‘doing nothing’ with his life but, in the process, sowing ‘discord, misery and sorrow’ in the family (Stolwijk, 1999: 53). Despondently, van Gogh told Theo that if he were so burdensome and troublesome to his family, perhaps it would be better if he were not around (as if he did not exist) (L154, L155). He visited his parents, but came away with a feeling that his family thought him ‘impossible’ and ‘suspect’ (L155) – certainly his father, revealing the shock and distaste born of a broken intergenerational trajectory, decried his life of ‘poverty’ as ‘insane’ (Hulsker, 1990: 85). Failure to enter the religious field dovetailed with failure in the familial microcosm, doubling van Gogh’s sense of worthlessness. Around this time, lost and disconsolate, he embarked on a period of wandering and rough sleeping around Belgium and northern France, including a visit to the studio of Jules Breton (with whom van Gogh was familiar from his Goupil days), but eventually he returned to the Borinage. He did so not to preach or evangelise, however, but to draw.

From Religion to Art as a Vocation

All the time van Gogh had engaged in the intra-firm struggles and strategies at Goupil, and all through his efforts to enter the religious field, one of his most consistent pastimes – in line with the tastes of the bourgeois at the time and reinforced by his specific family spirit – had been drawing. In London he often sat on the banks of the Thames and sketched the view, and he drew detailed pictures of his lodgings to give his family an image of where he was staying; when teaching he drew scenes from his window for his brother and parents; when studying for university in Amsterdam he had taken a serious interest in drawing maps of the Holy Land and bought a drawing manual to help improve his sketches of people; even in the Borinage, amid his failures, he had taken great pleasure in sketching the workers and their families going about their business around the mines and surrounding fields. He had failed in the art trade and he had failed to enter the religious field, and his illusio for both had now vanished. Taking up art as a vocation was, therefore, not just a conversion of a bourgeois leisure pursuit into a living, turning masteries cultivated in a bourgeois family and previously mobilised purely as a form of play and communication into a career, but the last available opportunity for carrying forward the family spirit; that is, for pursuing a profession within the range of possible and desirable futures given the parental heritage and aspirations and his own capabilities. Art as a vocation was, in other words, all he had left.

There were to be many twists and turns in van Gogh’s 10-year trajectory as an artist: his training in Antwerp and Paris, his loves and his losses along the way, his association with Impressionists and post-Impressionists, his move to Arles, his experiments with style and content and his eventual entry into the artistic field with growing recognition among fellow painters in France, inclusion in exhibitions and glowing review by the art critic Albert Aurier in the same year that he died. His previous experiences cast a long shadow, without a doubt: his days in the art trade bestowed a mastery of artistic history
and styles against which he could constantly compare and innovate, as well as niche models to imitate (e.g. Millet, Corot), and his former religious awe at the majesty of nature and the purity of its workers was transferred into a quest to capture and celebrate them in paint (Atkinson, 2020; Kodera, 1990; Silverman, 2000). Through all of this he depended on money and support from his brother, Theo, who was now a prosperous art trader and champion of the Impressionists in Paris. His relative distance from necessity thanks to his social capital, in other words, allowed him the freedom to pursue his stylistic experimentations and thematic commitments, just as it had done for Manet, and reject the safer course of classicist production (Bourdieu, 2017). His father died before seeing any of this and his mother never approved of his paintings or his life choices. The point is, however, that Vincent van Gogh had committed himself to the profession that would be his last and for which he would be most well known. His illusio never wavered thereafter; he never considered doing anything else.

Discussion: Van Gogh as a Limit Case

The trajectory of Vincent van Gogh within and between fields may seem singular and peculiar at first. It is indeed unique, of course, but it nonetheless contains general lessons for Bourdieusian sociological biography and, in particular, for analysis of entry into professions structured by fields as well as exit from them. The first, fitting Bourdieu’s signature emphasis, is that movements into, within and between fields or professions are firmly anchored in the broad probabilities and improbabilities provided by class origin. A specific range of futures was expected and desired, a specific zone of social space deemed acceptable and specific vocations envisioned as likely, appropriate and preferable pathways into that zone given the bourgeois lineage and need for re-ascent within the van Gogh family, downward deviation from which was bewailed and lamented by parents and keenly felt by van Gogh himself. At the same time, van Gogh hit upon his limits more than once, first in his theological training and then in his evangelical work, where his lack of facility with ancient languages and oratory expression – thanks to his curtailed schooling and paternal model – closed off the avenues he desired. Contrary to exaggerated claims that expanded higher education, increased geographical mobility and intensified job insecurity have generated a level of ‘individualisation’ and ‘de-traditionalisation’ today spelling the ‘death of class’, usually premised on little or no evidence, the same themes characterise contemporary trajectories: a bounded sense of the natural and desirable future given one’s starting place in the social space and occasional reminders of one’s limits when one thing or another – religious dedication for van Gogh, political discourses around ‘aiming high’ today – produces a discrepancy between subjective expectations and objective probabilities (Atkinson, 2010, 2012).

The second lesson, cleaving close to Bourdieu’s vision of the habitus as incorporated past, bears on the legacy of prior field membership – the effect, that is, of transposing masteries and dispositions originally adapted to one field to another. In van Gogh’s case, the argument could be made that his distinctive output in the artistic field, with its glorification of ordinary nature and its workers through all his changes in style, would not have been what it was without his prior familiarisation with Realism at Goupil and without the worship-void left by his turn away from religion. For others, it may entail
conversion of specific capitals and proclivities acquired in one field into capitals and proclivities in another field – bringing an ‘academic mind’ or ‘legal mind’ to a new struggle, with the (dis)advantages that might offer, or turning one’s familiarity with a prior field into material for present-day strategies (like the fiction author who satirises her academic experience in the ‘campus novel’).

If the first two lessons from van Gogh’s biography pertain to broad forces of inertia shaping the form and possibilities of a life course, and validate Bourdieu’s general framework, then another two bear on the ability to rigorously model, sociologically, flux and transition in individual trajectories and, with that, the need to go beyond Bourdieu’s usual concepts or ways of using them. One of these is that movement into and between fields over the course of a life frequently involves not just the development of desire for the specific stakes in play but weakening and rechannelling too. In van Gogh’s case, it was a diminution of the illusio in relation to the art trade generally and the Goupil game specifically, rechannelled into commitment to the religious field, which then faded in turn and was transferred on to art production. Today it could be the junior lecturer, the medical doctor or the lawyer abandoning their respective professions and entering others, or entering the corporate world, because their ‘heart was no longer in it’, it ‘lost its appeal’ or it became ‘too much’; it could be students embarking on a course of study with a profession in mind who then decide that it is no longer ‘for them’ because something else ‘inspired them’ or ‘grabbed their fancy’ along the way; or, given the existence of firms as fields, it could simply be the decision to leave one employer for another – hardly rare phenomena.

The final lesson, and perhaps the most instructive one, is that while the waxing and waning of illusio is inextricably bound up with intra-field position and trajectory, it can also be spurred by strategies and struggles stemming from implication in other fields, the family field above all. In van Gogh’s case, a dwindling commitment to the Goupil field entwined with subversion and decline within it, but these were inexorably related to his religious turn prompted by failed filial or amorous relations, and his crushed hopes for entering the religious field were tied up with familial disapprobation. For others today, disenchantment and departure may be born of failure, stasis or decline within the field of academe, law, medicine and so on, but these fates may themselves be the product, at least in part, of commitments, desires and endeavours within the familial microcosm. The mental-health fallout of failed relationships or family conflict, or the decision (possibly strategic) to ‘take a step back’ at work to ‘spend more time with the family’, may play a part, for example. Yet there is also the more pervasive pressure on women to sacrifice position and interest in a professional field – to forgo or delay strategies they would otherwise take if not (temporarily or permanently) exit a field altogether – because of institutionalised and internalised expectations that they will commit their time and interest to childrearing and homemaking, that is, to the family field (Bourdieu, 2001). In all these cases, as in van Gogh’s, habitus in relation to a single field is a vital but not sufficient explanatory tool; only by progressing to unpack the social surface can we begin to make sense of them. As extreme and unusual as it first appears, then, van Gogh’s life course, unfolded over a century ago in a corner of Europe, is but a limit case of regularities affecting billions across the globe today – a particular case of the possible whose singularity nevertheless discloses variations on the universal.
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Notes

1. These are freely available online, with accompanying notes, at www.vangoghletters.org. They are cited, following convention, in the form L001, L002 and so on, in chronological order.
2. The following account of van Gogh’s youth draws primarily from Kodera (1990), Naifeh and Smith (2013), Stolwijk (1999), Tralbaut (1969) and van Gogh-Bonger (1978).
3. On van Gogh’s schooling see, Van den Eerenbeemt (1972, 1973).
4. The standard account comes from van Gogh-Bonger (1978), but it is challenged by Hulsker (1990: 20) and Naifeh and Smith (2013: 95–96).
5. This interpretation integrates material from L065 n2, L377, as well as Bailey (1990: 66–71), Duquesne-Van Gogh (1913/2017: 10–11), Hulsker (1990: 26–27), Naifeh and Smith (2013: 112ff.) and van Gogh-Bonger (1978: xxv–xxvi).

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