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International Perspectives on Theorizing Aspirations. Applying Bourdieu's Tools.

Edited by Garth Stahl, Derron Wallace, Ciaran Burke and Steven Threadgold.

The language of 'raising aspirations' has been identified as a strategic element in neoliberal policy, aimed at individualising and psychologising economic inequality (e.g. Spohrer, 2011). It suggests that what needs to be addressed is the supposed lack of ambition of certain categories of youths – rather than the deep-seated structural inequalities that block opportunity for students of working-class and minority ethnic origin (no matter how high their aspirations might be), and continue to disadvantage even the highest achievers among them throughout the life-course (e.g. Gaddis, 2015; Rivera and Tilcsik, 2016). Descriptions of the profound disillusionment and resulting self-exclusion of underprivileged youths confronted with harsh circumstances and bleak futures, such as Willis' and McLeod's, have achieved the status of classic sociology texts (Willis, 1977/2016; McLeod, 1995). Yet, in line with achievement ideology, and in the same way as the 'culture of poverty' discourse, the language of 'low aspirations' has often been weaponised precisely against those who are systematically denied access to opportunity.

While there are many ways of theorising 'aspirations' both within and outside the discipline of sociology, the works of Pierre Bourdieu have been particularly useful to sociologists concerned with understanding the construction of aspirations in education. Bourdieu argued that aspirations reflected individuals' *objective* chances, as individuals internalised and learnt to embrace their structurally determined destinies (Bourdieu, 1977, 1996). Rather than equalising opportunity, the education system, Bourdieu argued, played a significant role in reinforcing and legitimising class-based inequalities. As such, through formal mechanisms and pervasive symbolic violence, schools contribute to shaping young people's aspirations, often to adjust these to individuals' most probable social futures – putting those who aspire beyond their social origins squarely back in their place.

This fine collection gathers scholars concerned with applying Bourdieu's concepts to the domain of 'aspirations' in educational contexts. As stated in the editor's foreword, the aim of the book series is to showcase research that explicitly applies theory in research methodology. A book on Bourdieu is a welcome addition to a collection with such a worthwhile aim. The introduction by the editors further emphasises the pedagogic ambition of the book and stresses the contributors' commitment not only to apply Bourdieu's concepts or 'tools' but to expand them as well by using them in new contexts and/or in conjunction with other theoretical perspectives. The varied contributions are held together by their focus on the question of 'aspirations', one broad and complex enough to draw together scholars working on diverse themes, contexts and lines of inquiry.

The book consists of 13 focused chapters preceded by two forewords (one by series editor Mark Murphy, and one by Professor Diane Reay) and an introduction by the editors. Each contribution theorises 'aspirations' in its own way and includes authors' methodological reflections. In line with the pedagogical ambition of the book series, most contributions include a detailed explanation of the chosen Bourdieusian 'tool' or set of tools. Throughout the book, core terms like capital, habitus, *illusio* and *doxa* as well as innovative variants like colonial habitus and shadow capital are explained and aptly put to work. The last two sections of the six-part collection bring in respectively gender and race - two crucial dimensions of inequality relatively neglected by Bourdieu – and thus fulfil the

promise of the book to demonstrate the adaptability, malleability, and continued relevance of Bourdieu's tools.

In the first chapter, after unpacking Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital, Ciaran Burke explains how he applied these to participants' biographies to show how social class shaped the 'field of possibles' for differently situated students. Next, Steven Threadgold draws on the concept of *illusio*, on different research projects concerned with class, as well as on his own social and professional trajectory, to illustrate the transformative potential of applying Bourdieu to these diverse topics and research settings. Third, in a dense but highly readable chapter that blends theory, methodological reflections and empirical data, Aina Tarabini and Marta Curran give an overview of a large-scale study of aspirations as learners' identities in the Catalan context, and how these relate to habitus. In the next chapter, Garth Stahl discusses Bourdieu's concept of *habitus clivé* and explains how his study of working-class boys and the tensions he encountered in their accounts led him to develop the related, more nuanced concepts of counter habitus and egalitarian habitus. Chapter 5, by Jim Albright, Jenny Gore, Maxwell Smith and Kathryn Holmes, is a methodological chapter that takes us through their thoughtful and reflexive operationalisation of capital in a longitudinal mixed-method study of Australian students' college aspirations.

In Chapter 6, through a fascinating account of their research on two US schools trying to replicate the environment of elite preparatory colleges, Amy Stich and Kristin Cipollone offer a clear demonstration that building aspirations alone is indeed a futile exercise. While elite educational spaces effortlessly produce aspirations as well as capital, the case-study schools can only equip their students with a truncated and less effective form ('shadow capital'). Next, Sol Gamsu focuses on another dimension of the connection between educational institutions and the constitution of aspirations. He argues that the way elite institutions accumulate symbolic capital over time is central to the constitution of their institutional habitus and that in turn, it plays a role in shaping students' habitus and aspirations. In Chapter 8, Russell Cross, Carmen Mills and Trevor Gale provide a fascinating example of the gap between practice and ideology as illustrated by the symbolic violence exerted by a well-meaning teacher on her less privileged students. Although not grouped in this way in the book, taken together these three chapters clearly illustrate how power relationships shape educational fields and how schools in turn shape their students.

In Chapter 9, opening the section on gender, Tamsin Bower's compelling analysis of the 'super-girl' not only explains how aspirations are shaped along classed and gendered lines, but also encourages a reflection on the social justice implications of 'raising aspirations' when this is done through symbolic violence and the demotion of working-class cultures. Chapter 10 by Joan Forbes and Claire Maxwell brings the family in, looking at how specific alignments between family and institutional habitus work to reinforce the aspirations of girls and their construction as 'positive agentic selves' in a Scottish elite school. The authors complicate and enrich Bourdieu's tools by introducing the concepts of agency, affect and spatio-temporalities.

The three chapters in the final section focus on race and ethnicity. Derron Wallace offers a convincing account of black boys' educational and professional aspirations as performance – a deliberate identity construction designed to counter the *doxa*. Next, Pere Ayling's brilliant chapter details how combining Bourdieu and Fanon allowed her to shed light on the construction of eliteness as whiteness in Nigeria. She shows how well Bourdieu can travel, including to postcolonial settings,

without eluding the epistemological and political implications of doing so. Finally, making explicit use of both Bourdieu and critical race theory, Barbara Adewumi focuses on middle-class black parents in London and in Kent, giving an insightful and vivid account of their struggles to achieve middle-class respectability among the (racist) white middle-class.

As a scholar of elite education, I very much enjoyed reading this collection. I particularly enjoyed the contributions that addressed gender and race in the last two sections of the book. However, I found that some chapters moved perhaps too quickly from an exposé of theoretical concepts to a summary of findings. Bearing in mind the pedagogic orientation of the series, readers unfamiliar with the authors' published works may not find these chapters particularly useful in demystifying Bourdieu's tools and how to apply them in practice. I much preferred the (many) chapters that presented empirical findings, such as interview excerpts, and carefully unpacked their meaning and implications through and with theory, thus making the methodological reflections much more meaningful. Some did so in a particularly astute manner within a limited space.

The shortness of chapters also means that with some notable exceptions, the political potential of these studies was not highlighted as explicitly as it could have been. In this respect, I feel the collection would have benefitted from a concluding chapter. There was ample scope to create productive dialogues between some of the chapters, to explore more systematically the various tensions (and gaps) arising from the contributions, to articulate their collective potential as political interventions and to outline a research agenda. A broader array of international perspectives would also have been useful as despite the title, with two exceptions, the contributions concern the Anglo-Saxon world. The impact of globalising forces on the construction of aspirations could also perhaps have been examined as part of this collection. Despite these inevitable limitations, the collection provides an accessible and stimulating introduction to the work of contemporary Bourdieusian scholars and will be of interest to students and researchers alike.

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