



The concept of habitus in migration studies. A literature review

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Abstract

The article reviews the use of Bourdieu's concept of habitus in migration studies in order to understand the contribution that the concept can give to the field. After a short presentation of the concept in Bourdieu theory and of critical perspectives on the status of migration studies, I reviewed 15 papers which apply the concept of habitus in the context of human mobility. The studies show that the concept can be used to investigate the mobility experience of different categories of migrant. Also, it is useful to analyze the impact of migration on families and communities left behind. Finally, some of the authors use the concept of transnational habitus as the specific habitus which results by the migration experience in transnational spaces.

Keywords

Migration; habitus; transnational habitus; cosmopolitan habitus; economic capital; social capital; cultural capital;

With this article I intend to review the use of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus in migration studies. Migration is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon which need to be analyzed with instruments that take into account of this complexity.

For this reason, I am going to investigate how the characteristics of the concept can contribute to understand some dimensions of the migration phenomenon and what kind of contribution it can bring to the field of migration studies.

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The concept of habitus in Pierre Bourdieu's theory

In *The Logic of the practice*, the French sociologist provides us with a definition of the concept of habitus: “The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. Objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor” (Bourdieu, 1990).

Therefore, the habitus is a durable system of practical rules that allows us, as social actors, to act in a meaningful way in our everyday life. This system of practical rules is, first of all, the result of the social conditions of existence (social class). The application of these patterns of behavior is not the result of a conscious act by the social actor, because the habitus is the result of primary socialization processes, which is why it structures our social activity. To explain how the habitus works, Bourdieu uses the expression “regulated improvisation”. Therefore, the habitus provides us with a scheme of action in which we improvise according to the situation and it is, for that reason, modifiable and adaptable (Bourdieu, 1990).

The habitus may also experience a hysteresis effect. With this term borrowed from physics, Bourdieu refers to the fact that the habitus which we are socialized to tends to persist even in new contexts and situations. As we approach new situations and contexts with the habitus we already have, in some cases we can experience a situation of discomfort until we re-adapt the habitus according to the new situation (Bourdieu, 1990). This proves that the habitus is a system of dispositions that has a certain degree of inertia and that adaptations to new situations always start from a previous habitus and that a new habitus is stratified with the previous one.

The concept of habitus, allowed Bourdieu to investigate different topics related to our social life such as matrimonial strategies (Bourdieu, 1990), taste and consumption practices (Bourdieu, 1984), gender relation (Bourdieu, 2001), to cite only few examples from the big research production of the author.

The concept of habitus could be also used effectively to investigate the practices related to migration phenomena. Based on what stated above, the concept can facilitate the comprehension of practical strategies followed by migrants to adapt to the host societies without ignoring the role of sending societies. Moreover, hysteresis which is a feature of habitus, could be useful to explain and to delve into the mechanism of discomfort experienced often by migrants in the host societies. That is because it expresses a mismatch between the habitus of the migrants – as it developed in the sending societies - and the field represented by the host society.

The field of migration studies

Regarding the migration studies field, scholars tried to explain population movements since the phenomenon became massive. The offered explanations have different focuses. They can analyze the phenomenon from a structural point of view as in “*push and pull*” model, in neoclassical approach, in the theory of dual market or in the world system theory, to cite a few examples. Other theories emphasize the active role of migrants in the phenomenon, such as theories that highlight the role of networks in facilitating migration or the theory of transnationalism (Castles, de Haas & Miller, 2014).

As Arango highlights, in his critical analysis of the status of the field, migration theories focus most on searching for causes of people moving ignoring another aspect, such as why people don't migrate. Also, they find the cause in one aspect and most of them are explanations *ex post*. Especially regarding the first point, he claims “This implies that more attention than hitherto should be bestowed upon family types, kinship systems, social systems, and social structures in general. Much the same can be said about the cultural dimensions and contexts of migration, including, but not stopping there, the costs of cultural adaptation”.

The author also recognizes the difficulties – inherent to the phenomenon – that are related to its complexity and he claims for an interdisciplinary approach (Arango, 2018).

Also, Brettel and Hollifield claim for interdisciplinarity in the field of migration studies through research projects in which scholars from different disciplines should cooperate and develop a shared set of variables. The two authors also suggest more cross-national projects specially to investigate from a political, economic, social, cultural point of view the impact on sending societies. Also, they suggest to build bridges “between deductive and interpretive approaches, between statistical regularities and unique occurrences, and between the economic and structural forces that shape migrant behavior, and the individual agency that operates both harmoniously and disharmoniously in relation to those forces” (Brettel & Hollifield, 2008).

Related to this debate, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus could give a contribution to fill in the gaps identified by the mentioned authors with regard to migration theory.

It can be used, not only in sociology but also in other disciplines interested in the phenomenon (e.g. economy, anthropology, human geography); it is a multidimensional concept as it is the result of the amount of economic capital, cultural capital and social capital; it can allow to consider the impact of migration not just in the host society but also in the country of origin and, finally, through hysteresis – one of its characteristics – it allows to study the mechanism of social adaptation in the host society.

The habitus in migration research

In this paper I reviewed 15 articles which use the concept of habitus in migration studies. I searched the papers through Google Scholars, Jstor and Researchgate using the key words migration habitus, transnational habitus.

As a result of my research, I could find a limited number of articles related to these topics. All the articles discussed in this paper have been published in sociological journals (*Sociology, Journal of Sociology*), journals focused on migration and ethnic topic (*Ethnic and Racial Studies, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, Identities*), journals focused on globalization processes and cosmopolitanisms (*Cosmopolitan Civil Societies, Global Networks, Environment and Planning A*), journals focused on human geography (*Canadian Geographer, Geography Research Forum*). One article has been published on *Entrepreneurship: Theory and Practice*, a business journal. Two researches have been published in collective volumes.

Analyzing the collected materials, it is possible to observe the concept appear in three variations: habitus, transnational habitus and cosmopolitan habitus.

Nowicka investigated how Polish migrants in the UK and Germany adapt in a multicultural context and how Polish migrants transfer their new habitus to friends and family in their home country.

Bourdieu's theory and the concept of habitus are used to respond to four fundamental problems regarding the analysis of this phenomenon: defining the dispositions of the agents who are involved in multicultural contexts; identifying the attitudes, dispositions and practices considered as processes that have an impact on society, not only on individuals; building a theory that explains how ideas and values are transferred between social actors; how power relations between groups influence the acquisition of cultural competences in the migration phenomenon. The author highlights how the concept of hysteresis in the habitus is useful in this context (Nowicka, 2015).

Marshall and Foster applied the concept of habitus to analyze the changes related to the migration to Grand Manan Island (Canada) by Newfoundland migrants who settled on the island permanently or for seasonal work. The concept is used to analyze the changes in social relations between the two communities and the meanings associated with the concept of community.

What the authors observe in their research is a tension in the contact between the two communities that is slowly beginning to produce transformations in both of them. On the one hand, the habitus of the Grand Manan community is strictly related with an island lifestyle, with strong family ties and with the fishing activity that have structured relations in a different way from the relations among the migrants who come from Newfoundland and who perceive these differences. The authors say that Newfoundland immigrants are between belonging to the new social context (Marshall & Foster, 2002).

Erel's research on Turkish and Kurdish women in Germany and the United Kingdom focuses on one specific dimension of the habitus: the cultural capital. The author uses the concept of cultural capital to investigate how in a labor market where immigrant women are often employed in unskilled jobs, some of them manage to have

access to positions according to their qualifications. For the authors, the cultural capital is not just a metaphorical baggage with which the migrants arrive in the host country and they use it there. The specificity of cultural capital in the migration process is that the initial cultural capital is modified and restructured once the migrant arrives in the host country. Also, these changes intersect with gender, ethnicity and social class (Erel, 2010).

Oliver and O'Reilly apply the concept of habitus with regard to migration from the United Kingdom to Malaga by retired people or freelancers. In their article, they confront the idea that in the contemporary society the concept of class is outdated. On the contrary, they use the concept of habitus to study how the social class reproduces through the migratory process investigated by them. They emphasize that migrants from the United Kingdom to Malaga, with their own lifestyle, tend to reproduce class differences in the host country, although in interviews they declare they want to leave all the concerns about the material condition in the country of origin. This is because the class is not simply an economic construct, but it is also defined from a cultural point of view (Oliver & O'Reilly, 2010).

The focus of McKay's article is on the habitus from a gender point of view. The author is interested on how the circular migration of women from a small indigenous community from the Philippines to Hong Kong changes the gender habitus and the way in which femininity and body habitus are interpreted. The concept of femininity in the small rural community is associated with domestic work and the fact that a woman should know what to do for the wellbeing of the family and for her own. The interviewed women interpret their migration experience as a necessity to do what is good for the family. Regarding the habitus of the body, what emerges from interviews is that the model of femininity in the community is that of a woman with a certain posture and body dispositions related to the fact that women are mostly involved in agricultural work. Women leaving to Hong Kong purchase a new habitus associated with the idea of modernity. This has a great impact also on the women remaining in the community. Young women work hard to increase their cultural capital in order to have the opportunity to leave the community at some point, to work abroad (McKay, 2001).

Also, on the gender dimension is focused the analysis of Gu and Lee. They are interested on the transformation of the capital and the adaptation of the habitus of migrant women employed in skilled jobs in Hong Kong. The authors investigate how the professional capital of migrant women is transformed and adapted to the new context and how the transformation of capital helps to adapt the habitus to a new context (Gu & Lee, 2019).

Noble used the concept of habitus in the analysis of a specific situation in which a member of the Lebanese community in Australia held a public discourse in front of the community of origin.

The author is not interested in the specific linguistic aspects, but in the fact that the switch of the language during the speech, from English to Arabic, produced a change in the attitude of the man, becoming more confident. Based on this fact, Noble argues that the dispositions of the body acquired through migration never become the same as the dispositions of an actor whose habitus was formed in the host country (Noble, 2013).

The concept of *transnational habitus* defines a habitus that is the specific product of migration. The studies that use it emphasize transnational dynamics and positioning in a specific transnational social space.

Guarnizo was the first author to use the concept of transnational habitus in a research about the return migration of people from the Dominican Republic who lived in the United States. What emerges from interviews is a dissonance between the desire to return permanently to the country of origin and the practices observed. This fact is explained by the concept of transnational habitus, which is a set of dual disposition that result from the migratory process and which includes the social position of the migrants and the transnational context in which the migration takes place. This explains the similarities in the habitus of the migrants from the same social categories and the practices of adaptation to the transnational context. As a result, this habitus generates multiple identities that cause apparently a dissonance in the behavior of social actors (Guarnizo, 1997).

Also, in the context of the theory of transnational migration, Kelly and Lusia used the concept of transnational habitus to investigate the migration experience, implying the connections with the place of origin and the influences that come from it and have an impact on it. The research is focused on migrants from the Philippines to Toronto and their families left behind.

Migrants from the Philippines in Canada are largely employed in the care sector, manufacturing, and retail, while in the country of origin they had a higher professional status. Using in their analysis the three dimensions of the habitus – the economic, cultural and social capital – and starting from the premise that the three dimensions can be converted into one another, the authors conclude that the economic capital acquired by working in Canada is transformed into cultural capital and social capital in the Philippines. This is because economic capital is invested in the country of origin to increase the cultural capital of family members (Kelly & Lusia, 2006).

Patel and Conklin use the concept of transnational habitus to study how transnational entrepreneurs balance their social networks in two different social spaces, in order to be successful in their activity. For the authors, a characteristic of this habitus is the bifocality, that is, the actors practice of comparing their situation in both social spaces which allows them to adapt and increase the advantages in both spaces (Patel & Conklin, 2009).

Zechner is interested in how the transnational habitus is displayed in migrants once they reach retirement age. In her research she analyzed eight stories about the lives of people already retired or near to retirement. Respondents come from the middle class, from western countries and have moved to Finland. Only two of them are Finnish migrants. The research shows that mobility is a key attitude in their transnational habitus and they also want to keep it during retirement, although it may be affected by health problems or policies that restrict the transfer of benefits or limit access to services (Zechner, 2017).

Zontini and Reynolds investigated experiences and practices in the migration phenomenon in relation to Caribbean and Italian youth in the UK. These young people

belong to the second generation of migrants. The authors use the concept of *transnational family habitus*, referring to all the values, ways of thinking and being family in the transnational context. The authors want to understand how children and young people experience the transnational family, while most of the research focus on them as a vulnerable category. In this research, they consider children and young people who have an experience of two countries and who have not necessarily had the experience of migration. The family which the authors refer to should be considered as the totality of the relatives with whom children maintain a relationship, not in a strictly nuclear family sense (Zontini & Reynolds, 2018).

Nedelcu analyzed the role of technology in the development of the transnational habitus in the relations between Romanians abroad and the members of the families in the country of origin. Through interviews, she found that communication technologies facilitate socialization processes within different social spaces and connect lifestyles between migrants and non-migrants, enhancing differences and thus creating new transnational habitus (Nedelcu, 2012).

Regarding the concept of the *cosmopolitan habitus*, it is used in two of the articles selected and it is complementary to the concept of habitus and transnational habitus. It seems to be a preliminary condition for the development of a transnational habitus, being the totality of attitudes and knowledge that facilitate the adaptation in a transnational context.

Jung, Dalton and Willis are the authors of a study about the migration of North Korea citizens first to South Korea and then to Australia. The authors' focus is on the ways in which migrants adapt to a new social context by reformulating their own habitus (Jung, Dalton & Willis, 2017). This readjustment seems to be problematic, as the authors observe, because South Korea is a completely different country from North Korea where the migrants' habitus has been formed. The authors use the concept of cosmopolitan habitus referring to all the skills and attitudes that allow individuals to act successfully in a global community (e.g. knowledge of the English language, acceptance of diversity). Migrants from North Korea, when move to South Korea, experience discrimination, isolation and alienation. This condition of disorientation is explained by the fact that their habitus is dysfunctional in the new situation and that is why many of them decide to migrate further to purchase a cosmopolitan habitus that is an important condition for being competitive in a global world. Therefore, further migration to an English-speaking country is a strategy in order to acquire a cosmopolitan habitus. (Jung, Dalton & Willis, 2017).

Plüss also uses the concept of transnational habitus, emphasizing the role of cultural capital. The author assumes that through migration, social actors experience changes in their cultural identity in order to have access to cultural, social and economic resources in different geographical and cultural spaces. Her study is based on three in-depth interviews with migrants from Singapore to Hong Kong. Plüss 's conclusions about the cases analyzed are that migrants from Singapore are equipped with a cosmopolitan habitus because of the education system based on bilingualism. This feature allows them

to live in different social contexts where cultural, social and economic capital increase further (Plüss, 2009).

Conclusions

What emerges from the studies mentioned above is that the concept of habitus can be applied in analyzing multiple aspects in the study of migration and different categories of migrants. The concept applies to the experiences of economic migrants, as applies to those from the wealthy social classes or with a high professional status. The concept of habitus is useful in investigate the changes in the experiences of migrants, as well as family members and communities which do not directly experience mobility.

Moreover, the concept and its three dimensions (economic, cultural and social capital), stress the convertibility of capital, in the sense that changes in one dimension have an impact on the others, for example, the economic capital acquired through migration is converted in cultural capital in the country of origin (Kelly & Lusia, 2006).

Also, the concept allows an intersectional analysis of migration with gender, age and ethnicity dimension.

Furthermore, the concept of habitus requires that both social spaces and related agents' positions should be taken into account, while, usually, migration studies have focused on either the dynamics of the country of origin or – more often – those of the host country. Therefore, the concept allows to overcome the ethnocentric tendencies in approaching the phenomenon, especially in the host society (Sayad, 2008).

One aspect that does not seem to be sufficiently detailed in the studies mentioned above is the hysteresis effect experienced by migrants, once arrived in the new context. This phenomenon allows to pinpoint those constitutive practices of the original habitus that are questioned in the migration process. It is in the moment when the hysteresis effect manifests itself that the habitus and the respective social conditions that constitute it are highlighted.

Finally, the concept of habitus, especially the concept of transnational habitus and the related theory of practice with regard to the study of migration, can be considered an attempt to overcome the structure-agency dualism. Migrants are not only passive subjects determined by the structure, but they are active agents who act within the structure and produce changes in it through their practices and strategies.

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