

## Research Paper

### Pierre Bourdieu and non-habitual decisions

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#### Contextualization

Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) developed his concept of decision-making from the context of reflexive and repetitive choices affecting the daily lives of people. This concept was grounded in ethnographic research of French and Algerian society and the individual experiential and group culture of these societies. As Bourdieu's interest was the daily lives and routines of these peoples, his theory of decision-making involved the ideas of habitus, capital and field resulting in specific and immediate practices. By nature, these decisions are habitual rather than considered and deterministic which are reflective of a complexity of thought for the resulting practice. The individual determination of a non-immediate decision to withdraw from doctoral research programs is the focus of this paper. Such withdrawal decisions can be emotional for the student and have an effect on the doctoral programs of universities that can result in the loss of student, university and society cultural and financial capitals.

**Abstract:** *Bourdieu's theory of decision making is based on habitual and immediate decisions which are reflexive and reactive and which rely on dispositions and various forms of capital relative to a particular field. However, there are a number of decisions that are not reactive and immediate but are developed over time because of the enduring nature of the decision to the decision maker. Using empirical research data collected for a doctoral thesis, the factors of this habitual and immediate style of decision-making are explored relative to non-habitual decision-making. This poses the research question of whether the same factors as postulated by Bourdieu can be applied in decisions made over a period of time, specifically postgraduate student withdrawal from doctoral programs. The research is methodologically qualitative with empirical ethnographic data from a conversational style interview, in addition to autoethnographic data.*

#### Introduction

Within the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, decision-making is thought to be reflexive and immediate (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu (1977) theorised that decisions are a reflection of the person's knowledge and experiences which are retained as capital resources and the persons' habitus within a particular field. The habitus according to Bourdieu includes the dual structures of dispositions which are the person's beliefs and understandings, and the person's motivations. When confronted with a situation, the habitus then determines the persons' tendency to act within that situation or field in an immediate manner which is seen by Bourdieu as an automated response. That is, these decisions are considered to be habitual phenomenological reflexive reactions to various situations arising within the field.

Recent doctoral research indicates that the Bourdieusian model of decision-making may be temporally extended to encompass a greater time frame and that these decisions are considered cognitive deliberations by the person relative to the situation (Templeton, 2015).

One of the conclusions interpreted from the thesis research data was that the decision-making model theorised by Pierre Bourdieu (1984) may be extended to include more durable non-time

bound decisions that reflect student withdrawal from doctoral study. This finding was contrary to the theorised position of Bourdieu. The objective of this paper is to present the collected data, empirical and literature and to explore the time frame for non-habitual decisions. Utilising Bourdieu's sociological factors of decision-making of dispositions, capital, habitus and field and a framework of deterministic decision-making based on capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2007; Gagne, 2014) and Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000b) to understand the influence of the consequences of withdrawal on this decision, the timing of the decision and the implementation of these decisions will be explored. This research will have an effect on the analysis of non-immediate decisions such as student withdrawal from the field of doctoral education and pose timely intervention to alleviate student withdrawal.

## **Literature Review**

Bourdieu (1977) considers that decisions are reflexive and applied to practice in an immediate and habitualised style. These decisions are thought to be habitual and repetitive based on the individuals' habitus within a particular field. As such this decision-making process was not applied to situations that occurred outside of the individual's dispositions and capital such as withdrawal from a doctoral research degree. An explanation for this immediacy in decision-making is given by Swartz (1997, p. 197) who explains that 'the concept of habitus permits Bourdieu to stress that educational choices are dispositional rather than conscious, rational calculations'. However, this does not explain those decisions which are not immediate and are implemented over time and with consideration of the future unknown consequences of those decisions.

According to Bourdieu (1990), habitus is considered to be 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations...' (p. 53). Habitus and therefore our dispositions influence our decisions and therefore our practices. This interaction is expressed by Bourdieu (1984, p. 101) as '[habitus x capital] + field = practice' such that our habitus is influenced by our accumulated capital within a particular field of endeavour. Natural dispositions may be negated or modified by our capital to induce deterministic decisions that are contrary to our beliefs and understandings as discussed by Bourdieu and Wacquant (2007). Thus student's decisions to withdraw from doctoral programs can be deterministic decisions influenced by external factors such as cultural, social, financial or symbolic capital rather than the habitus.

For Bourdieu (1990) dispositions are developed within the habitus which he considers to be subjective, that is psychological in nature and therefore emotive. While experiences and knowledge are collected outside the habitus and retained as capital, such collected information is regarded as objective or practice. Thus emotive decisions derived within the habitus from our dispositions and capitals are psychological until they emanate from the habitus as decisions and implemented as practices.

A student's autonomous withdrawal from doctoral studies has been linked to Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Gagne (2014) as student engagement which 'is fostered by a corresponding dispositional orientation and facilitating climate" (p. 43) and which can manifest as a behaviour. That is, the three components of Bourdieusian decision-making of habitus, field and practice are represented within Self-Determination Theory. Thus doctoral student withdrawal decisions may be explored through a lens of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000a) which indicates that decision-making can be emotive or a conscious, rational calculated process such that a decision (Magno, 2011) to withdraw from a doctoral research program is not an emotive dispositional decision but rather a deterministic decision based on the student's capital. Capital according to Bourdieu (1977) is an accumulation of resources such that education is considered to be cultural capital. Capital is the basis of student

withdrawal decisions within an educational field and may involve one or more of the Bourdieusian capitals of cultural, social, economic or symbolic (Bourdieu, 1977). This implies that the student's decision to withdraw from a doctoral research program can be deterministic rather than dispositional.

Self-determination is part of the individuation process whereby there exists a relationship between self-determination and educational persistence and coping with educational issues. The role of self-determination within doctoral research studies is the student's ability to make decisions relative to one's future based on the student's initiative and perseverance. Such decision-making is associated with higher levels of autonomy and psychological functioning that provides the ability to make rational and conscious calculated decisions not dominated by emotionalism (Nota, Soresi, & Ferrari, 2011). Such decision-making is deterministic and developed from experiential knowledge which corresponds to the sociological concept of capital of Bourdieu (1977).

## Methodology

The research invokes a qualitative paradigm that involved the collection of empirical ethnographic data from the author and one other participant. The data was originally collected for a Doctor of Education thesis during October and November 2013. The participant Beth (a pseudonym) was recruited from advertisements in professional association member communications. The participant was interviewed using recorded Skype audio and video subsequent to accepting the conditions contained within the Informed Consent forms. Ethics approval was granted by the University of Southern Queensland. The interview was transcribed and a copy of the transcription returned to the participant for validation.

From a total of four interviews for the doctoral research, one has been selected for this paper in conjunction with the autoethnographic recollections of the author. The interview was selected as of the remaining three; one withdrew their participation citing future professional conflicts while two participants withdrew from doctoral studies due to university mismanagement and an on-farm accident. As this paper is focused on voluntary student withdrawal and dispositions these interviews were not analysed for this paper.

According to Chang (2008) the use of ethnography in conjunction with autoethnography increases the phenomenographic detail of the collected data which can enhance the analysis and interpretation of the data. An applied thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011) of these two ethnographies was undertaken with NVivo qualitative data software to develop themes within the data. The applied thematic analysis relative to this study was extracted for the findings which includes participant narrative of their experiences.

## Findings

### Beth

Within three months of commencing her PhD research program, Beth was aware that the supervision process was not meeting her expectations of doctoral study. At the completion of twelve months she voluntarily withdrew her enrolment. She narrates her reason for withdrawing as:

*I dropped out mostly because of difficulties with the supervision processes and support from the university...I had a supervisory panel of three people, one of them my main supervisor was who had got the money through the ARC for the research which two PhD scholarships were attached to. I had one of those scholarships.*

She then continues to articulate her thoughts on her decision to withdraw:

*I came up a few months before my scholarship started to actually help this person to write up some research he'd been doing and I knew about a month, less than two months into my PhD that it wasn't for me. Working with this person was not going to give me the experience that I wanted. I didn't think I was going to learn anything from him...I really had no personal or professional respect for him but unfortunately the scholarship was tied to the funding which he had acquired, so there was no way of taking the scholarship elsewhere.*

From the preceding narratives, Beth has indicated that within three months she decided that this PhD research program was not satisfactory and that she was considering withdrawing from the research project and her PhD. Her motivation for continuing with this study until twelve months were completed is not articulated but the implementation of her decision to withdraw was enacted nine months later.

This is not the habitual decision-making style as theorized by Bourdieu (1990) but a delayed conditional response to her withdrawal decision. While not articulated by Beth, there is an implication that had the doctoral study process met her expectations, she would not have withdrawn her enrolment. While the original decision to withdraw after three months may have been emotional it does not suggest a dispositional decision. Rather, her expectations and her educational goals would not be achieved; that is, her cultural capital was negatively affected by the unsatisfactory supervision process.

According to Bourdieu (1990) and Bourdieu and Wacquant (2007) capital can replace dispositions in the decision-making process. Thus Beth's decision to withdraw was controlled by her habitus on the knowledge held within her cultural capital while the deferred implementation of her decision was possibly a cognitive response to validate her decision and redefine and refocus her future goals. Such delays in implementing such a decision into practice are not uncommon according to Magno (2011) who theorises that

*how the learner perceives control in learning, autonomy support from the environment, and self-competence to do the task plays an important role in self-determination in the learning process...learner's perceptions on the nature of knowledge and learning also relates as to how they maintain the use of cognitive strategies and learning outcomes (p. 2).*

Magno (2011) also indicates that learners who believe they are in control and who receive autonomous support from their supervisors demonstrate an increased intensity of self-determination as they internalise their learning. This was not the situation narrated by Beth who considered she was unsupported in her doctoral studies. As she articulates, her principal supervisor stated that 'Oh I don't think she needs supervision'. All of this unsatisfactory accumulated capital served to convince Beth that the probability of successfully completing her PhD was low or that a failure would result. Thus her dispositions could not successfully counter the effect of her capital such that she concluded the better outcome was a deterministic conditional decision (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2007) to withdraw which was implemented after nine months of conscious and rational consideration (Magno, 2011) rather than a dispositional reaction. She has retained her researcher position at the university while considering her future PhD aspirations and goals.

## **Robert**

My own doctoral withdrawal decision was made in response to my inability to prepare an academically acceptable research proposal. I had utilised two semesters in attempting to research and write the proposal without success. At the commencement of the third semester

I had made the conscious decision to withdraw prior to the academic Census date if my proposal submission was not accepted early into this third semester. Thus my decision to withdraw was developed over time and was also conditional on a successful future outcome and therefore deferred until this condition was either achieved or not.

In my deliberations to withdraw I considered the perceived wastage of two semesters as personally unacceptable and withdrew to refocus my thoughts and re-examine my research proposal without the ongoing emotions of possible failure. Thus my decision-making was initially dispositional supported by the rationalisation of failing to complete within the Research Training Scheme (RTS) timeframe for doctoral studies. I perceived my withdrawal as a strategic tactic to reposition my thoughts and understandings of the research topic; a tactic that proved successful.

The realization of my inability to complete within the required timeframe was the cultural capital upon which the decision was made; that is, the decision was deterministic (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2007) or conscious and rational rather than emotive and dispositional (Magno, 2011). My disposition towards doctoral research study was unchanged and favourable but was contrary to my cultural capital which my habitus considered would result in a failure to complete (Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2007).

Thus, like the withdrawal decision of Beth, my decision was conditional on an outcome and not made within the sociological decision-making model of Bourdieu (1977) which is reactive and immediate. Rather our decisions were conscious and rational which were influenced by our cultural capital contrary to the dispositional decision-making style of Bourdieu, and deferred by the conditional outcomes that we had applied to the implementation of the decision. While my achievement goal (Ryan & Deci, 2000b) was to refocus and complete my doctorate, Beth's goal was to redefine and refocus her achievement goals whilst continuing in her employment role. Thus, while we had different goals, our decisions to withdraw were deterministic.

## **Conclusions**

While the sociological model of decision-making developed by Bourdieu (1984) has been shown in previous research to be applicable to doctoral research student withdrawal decisions (Templeton, 2015), the immediacy of the decision is not habitual nor emotive but rational and consciously considered by the student. Although the withdrawal decision may cause emotional responses within the student, the decision is rational and considered and implemented within a timeframe selected by the student with regard to their ongoing educational goals (Gagne, 2014). However, the Bourdieusian concepts of habitus, capital, field and practice are applicable to the withdrawal decision, especially motivation within the habitus and capital relative to field.

For Beth and myself, the timing of the decision to withdraw was developed after our individual problems were recognised; these decisions were not habitual and immediate, but were conditional on perceived future experiences. This was the cause for the time delay between the decision and the implementation of the decision to withdraw resulting from our rationalisation of our decisions and the conditions under which the practice was implemented.

Such withdrawal decisions are considered to be congruent with the theories of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000a) and developed within the knowledge of the consequences of such actions and future achievement goals. For Beth, the withdrawal may be permanent resulting in non-completion of her doctorate while my withdrawal was temporary and strategic to refocus my cognitions to develop a research proposal (Nota *et al.*, 2011). While there is an emotive aspect to the implementation of our withdrawals, these decisions were

made after rational and conscious deliberations and therefore deterministic. That is, our cultural capital negated our natural dispositions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2007).

The time delay in the implementation of such decisions by students provides a 'window of opportunity' for the higher education institution to implement intervention strategies to assist in the resolution of the students' issues. This may only occur if the student issues are recognised by the doctoral supervisors and or the student counsellors who are the interface between the university and the student. The style of the resolution will vary depending on the policies of the particular university.

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