On Bourdieu: Public Relations in Field Struggles

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Abstract

According to Bourdieu, actors struggle and compete to position themselves in what he calls “fields” with the help of different forms of symbolic and material resources (capital). In this chapter, it is argued that public relations assists organizations in the struggle for such positions, and a typology of different resource types is developed. By extending the sociology of Bourdieu to an analysis of public relations, a more realistic perspective of the practice can be achieved: a perspective that is based on conflict, rather than on a consensus perspective of the world.
The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu implies that social actors struggle and compete to position themselves in *fields* with the help of different forms of symbolic and material resources (*capital*) (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The field is a social space of relations of dominance, subordinance, or equivalence, rooted in the types and amounts of resources that actors possess. Here, it is argued that public relations assists organizations in the struggle for such positions, and a typology of different resource types is developed using examples from the political field of energy and the environment. Extending the sociology of Bourdieu in this way means that a more realistic perspective of public relations than that provided by prevailing theories of the discipline can be obtained.

Liberal pluralism prevails in much public relations research, and the possibilities for harmony and consensus are emphasized (e.g., Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Heath, 1997). For scholars, a conflict perspective on society, such as that offered by Bourdieu, may produce a better understanding of the practice of public relations in society. For practitioners, the sociology of Bourdieu may help achieve a certain *cultural literacy* (Schirato and Yell, as cited in Webb, Schirato, and Danaher, 2001), which is necessary for their strategies to succeed.

This chapter presents an overview of selected parts of Bourdieu’s work. As this French scholar dealt with neither organizations nor public relations, it is necessary to extend and reformulate some of his theoretical points. This endeavor is particularly helped by work in media sociology, which, in turn, is used to construct the typology of organizational resources that is suggested.

**On the Sociology of Bourdieu**

Pierre Bourdieu is considered to be among the most prominent contemporary social thinkers, and a number of books introduce and discuss his contributions to knowledge (Calhoun,
LiPuma, & Postone, 1993; Elliott & Turner, 2001; Fowler, 2001; Jenkins, 2002; Robbins, 2000; Swartz, 1997, 1998; Webb et al., 2001). Here, a selection of some of his key concepts is made, based on what is deemed to be relevant to an analysis of public relations.

The focus of Bourdieu’s sociology is uncovering the way in which the social world is structured, constituted, and reproduced through individual and collective struggle to conserve or transform the social world. Of particular interest are those struggles that “seek to impose the legitimate definition of reality” (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 141). Bourdieu was originally trained as an anthropologist, but his research interest later veered towards sociology, and he became a truly multidisciplinary researcher, recognized not only in anthropology and sociology, but also in education, cultural theory, and philosophy, to mention just a few. Apart from this move from anthropology to sociology, however, it has been argued that it is difficult to recognize a specific theoretical “progression” or “stages” in the works of Bourdieu, due to their truly eclectic nature (Webb et al., 2001). This eclectic approach was also reflected in how he employed a whole range of different methods, from ethnography to statistical models, alongside metatheoretical and philosophical approaches. Throughout most of his work, however, a consistent interest in language and power is evident.

Language and Power

Bourdieu saw language as both a battlefield and a weapon. His perspective was that language structures our understanding of the world and that it is the medium by which these understandings are communicated. Language is both a structuring structure and a structured structure. In language and language use, traces of the social structure are expressed and reproduced (Bourdieu, 1991). The crucial point here is that language is a form of symbolic power that is often not recognized as power. As previously mentioned, the task of sociology is,
according to Bourdieu, to uncover social structures and the mechanisms that help to reproduce or transform them (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). It has also been claimed that by calling attention to such aspects, he continued the project of the Enlightenment. Bourdieu believed that scholarly work should be an intervention in the social world, rather than disinterested reflections. He was particularly critical of traditional authority and sought to demonstrate how certain mechanisms in society make positions of dominance appear to be “natural” or the result of personal choices. In his later years, Bourdieu began to engage directly in political action, challenging the ideology of neo-liberalism generated by economists and administrators. Neo-liberalism is sold to the public, he said, not in the form of policy documents, but in everyday language. An analysis of everyday language can help us to grasp what is taken for granted within a society, the doxa, or what is unquestioned universal opinion. Having a “doxic attitude,” for instance, means “bodily and unconscious submission to conditions that are in fact arbitrary and contingent” (Webb et al., 2001, p. xi). An analysis of doxa and the stories that, for instance, the bureaucracy tells is thus a crucial activity for researchers to examine truth claims and the use of symbolic power (Webb et al., 2001). In other words, Bourdieu’s work bears one of the most important hallmarks of critical social science--that of “identifying and challenging assumptions behind ordinary ways of perceiving, conceiving, and acting” (Brookfield, as cited in Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p. 8).

At the same time, however, Bourdieu was also a fierce critic of another important modern scholar who has been linked to the Enlightenment project--Jürgen Habermas (see Chapter Two). Bourdieu argued that false universalizations were present in the works of Habermas. He believed that Habermas failed to see that forms of symbolic violence have colonized the mind and that there are material conditions for reason. Such symbolic violence may include being denied resources or being treated as an inferior human being (Fowler, 2001; Webb et al., 2001). For
Bourdieu, “linguistic relations [are] always relations of symbolic power” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 142). Unlike many rhetoricians, linguists, and discourse analysts, however, he did not focus only on language itself, but also on objective structures, to explain and understand these power relations. To grasp his position, a foray into a key part of his sociology—“the theory of practice”—is necessary.

The Theory of Practice

Bourdieu’s main contribution to social science has been his “theory of practice.” He grappled with the classic antagonism concerning idealism and materialism, giving primacy to the structure or agency between subjectivism and objectivism. Subjectivism is here understood as the perspective “asserting that social reality is produced through the thoughts, decisions and actions of individual agents. . . . [Objectivism is] the idea that people’s actions and attitudes are determined by objective social structures such as those relating to class, ethnicity, gender and language” (Webb et al., 2001, pp. xiv-xv).

Bourdieu ended up instead advocating that relations should be seen as the dominant factor (e.g., Bourdieu, 1972/1977, 1980/1990). It has been stated that his thinking began with Karl Marx, but that he drew more substantively from other classic sociologists, such as Emile Durkheim and Max Weber (see chapter 15 in this volume) (Swartz, 1997). Using the three concepts of habitus, field, and capital, he constructed a sociology that he argued made the opposition between subjectivism and objectivism obsolete.

Habitus. A habitus is a structuring mechanism that generates strategies for actors in the social world and through which actors relate to the social world. Habitus can be understood as a system of durable dispositions, that is, as an internalized mental or cognitive structure that functions both consciously and unconsciously and constrains what people should and should not
do. A habitus is based on all of the situations through which dispositions are created and that an individual experiences throughout his or her lifetime (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Bourdieu did not argue that the habitus determines actions or that the habitus push actors around and makes them passive. Reflection can help an actor to resist the habitus. As a system of durable dispositions, it is an open system; it produces society, but is at the same time produced by it. It is open for modification and “constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures. It is durable but not eternal” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 133).

The implications of this are discussed below, but an important point to note here is that people are not only consciously striving for clearly perceived goals. The strategies that are suggested by habitus must not be conflated with intentionality. Practices may be “reasonable without being the product of a reasoned purpose, and, even less of conscious computation” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 120). Habitus here breaks with the notion of humans as rational agents through and through--as homo economicus. The calculation of interest is tacit.

Field. Field is the next important concept, and it has a dialectical relationship with habitus. A field is understood as a social space or network of relationships between the positions occupied by actors. These different positions are structured and anchored in forms of unequally shared power or capital. Conflict and competition characterize the relationships between the actors as they try to accumulate, conserve, or convert different types of capital. Actors take up positions of dominance, subordinance, or equivalence (homology), according to the types and amounts of capital they possess.

Capital. Capital as a concept is highly elastic, a trait that makes it quite compelling but also open to criticism. Bourdieu has written about several different types of capital, including
political, personal, functional, professional, linguistic, intellectual, and scholastic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). Thus, the definition of capital is very wide and takes in both material and immaterial resources. However, in his article on the different forms of capital, Bourdieu narrowed them down to three fundamental types: economic capital (money, property), cultural capital (knowledge, skills, educational qualifications), and social capital (connections, membership of a group). At the same time, however, he argued that all of these forms of capital may also be apprehended as symbolic capital (prestige, honor) (Bourdieu, 1986).

Capital is considered to be accumulated labor: it is not a natural given, and it demands investment. In a sense, capital is the “energy of social physics” (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 122). This implies that capital only functions relationally within a field. Capital is scarce, it is in demand, and it creates differences. Actors are distributed within the field in the first dimension according to the overall volume of the capital they possess. In the second dimension, they are distributed according to the composition of their capital--in other words, according to the relative weight of the different kinds of capital in their total set of assets (Bourdieu, 1991).

The social world is seen as being made up of several such fields that are more or less autonomous, but subsumed under the overarching field of power. This world is often referred to as comprising literary, business, scientific, and bureaucratic fields, among others. At the organizational level, a research center can be said to belong to the scientific field, a parent-teacher association to the educational field, a bank to the economic field, a theater to the cultural field, a ministry to the bureaucratic field, and so on. A typical trait of such fields is that they place a higher value on one type of capital than on another, although that type of capital may be worth less in another field. In the field of business, for example, economic capital is prioritized, but it has virtually no importance in the academic field. In the latter field, it is academic
significance and one’s rating by one’s peers that counts. Such capital may only be appreciated properly within the academic field, although some kind of recognition can also be won outside of it (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

The limits of a field are “always at stake in the field itself, and therefore admits of no a priori answer” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 100). One general pointer is that the limits of a field lie where its effects cease. To add further complexities to the theory, every field may be part of one or several other larger fields or may itself contain sub-fields. The aforementioned research center, for instance, may be part of the political field through its connections with a political agenda and political institutions. An environmental group could be said to belong to the political field at the same time that it has its own sub-fields with field-specific capital centered on certain environmental values. One could also talk about a field that encompasses all actors involved with issues concerning energy and the environment. The relationship between different fields, however, is not governed by any transhistoric laws. Therefore, each historical case must be investigated separately (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Bourdieu also announced a certain “program” for proper field analysis and stressed that the field must be the focus of a research operation, as the “true object of social science is not the individual” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 107). The researcher should focus on the competing interests, the conflicts they generate, and the whole logic of a field, which can only be done by plunging “into the particularity of an empirical reality, historically located and dated, but with the objective of constructing it as a ‘special case of what is possible’” (Bourdieu, 1994/1998, p. 2). In other words, the study of particular historical conflicts on energy and the environment should contribute something other than “just” intrinsic insights into those conflicts.
Criticism

Bourdieu’s often-impenetrable prose has invited a fair amount of criticism (Jenkins, 2002). It has also been remarked that his rhetorical strategy is particularly ironic, given his penchant for sociology as an instrument of struggle for circles beyond academia. That Bourdieu later started to use interviews as a mode of communication has been seen as his recognition of the problem (Swartz, 1997).

However, the most common theoretical criticism of his theory of practice is that it has not delivered on its promise to abolish the opposition between the micro and the macro, between the individual and the structure. The accusation is that the perspective is firmly rooted in objectivism, as Bourdieu presented his analyses as based in the “real” material world, “where behavior has its causes, but actors are not allowed to have their reasons” (Jenkins, 2002, p. 97). The role of deliberate decision-making is underemphasized, as habitus is given a prominent role. Most action is seen as reproducing a structure that gives privilege to the already dominant. Actors are given less “freedom” than they are granted by other sociologists (e.g., Giddens, 1984/1995). This position is also one of the reasons that it is difficult to apply the theories that Bourdieu espoused for linking rhetoric and capital (i.e., Bourdieu, 1991). I agree with this criticism, and do not use the concept in public relations analysis.

By rejecting the use of the concept of habitus, however, the problem of intentionality surfaces. Bourdieu was not interested in decisions, actors, or strategies per se, but in positions. One of his arguments for the theory of practice is that it expands “the sphere of interest while reducing that of utility and consciousness” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 25). In the context of public relations analysis, however, it is precisely the actors and their intentional and conscious strategies to influence thoughts and decisions that are of interest. What appears to one analyst to
be well laid-out strategies, or what is presented as such by an interviewee, may in fact be the result of chance, as well as unconscious deliberation.

An additional problem with using the theory of practice is its claim that the notions of habitus, positions, field, and capital may only be understood as systemic concepts, that is, they can only be defined “within the theoretical system that they constitute, not in isolation” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 96). However, there have also been arguments against attempts to achieve unambiguous meaning, as theories are believed to have a generative function. Here, this is interpreted as an invitation to borrow and expand, much like the kind of pragmatic relationship that Bourdieu himself had with other authors (Bourdieu, 1990a).

Relevance for Public Relations

Given the centrality that Bourdieu accords to communication, his work has become increasingly popular in media studies (Benson & Neveu, 2005; Webb et al., 2001). With a precious few exceptions (i.e., Edwards, 2006; Edwards, 2007; Harris, 2005; Ihlen, 2002, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2007), however, his work seems to have been largely ignored within public relations. Here, it is argued that a reworked version of his sociology has a lot to contribute, although substantial breaks with, if not violations of, Bourdieu’s work, beginning with a suggestion for a typology of organizational resources, are made. The concept of the field can be used loosely as a way of framing an organization’s wielding of resources. That actors possess different types of resources is not an original notion. Several theorists have analyzed aspects of political processes, the strategies adopted by actors, and the resources they have drawn upon (e.g., Berry, 1977; Cobb & Ross, 1997; Rochefort & Cobb, 1994; Uhrwing, 2001). Thus, it may legitimately be asked what use can be made of the theory of practice if so much of its proposed framework is rejected. The advantage of drawing on Bourdieu, however, is his emphasis on
4. On Bourdieu

relational and dynamic aspects. The positions of actors are seen in relation to each other and are explained as functions of their type and amount of capital, the field-specific appreciation of these forms of capital, and constant attempts to acquire, hold on to, or convert capital. The distribution of capital is also an expression of power relationships, which, in turn, are expressed in rhetorical strategies. A focus on these aspects is helpful in grasping the struggle and social space that actors are situated within. Public relations practice fits into this picture if it is regarded as a practice that assists organizational actors in various fields in pursuing their interests. In this sense, and as argued by Edwards (2007), public relations should drop its “façade of disinterestedness” (p. 3).

An Excursion in Media Sociology

One charge made against Bourdieu is that he treats individuals and institutions as entities with similar status and that he does not contribute a theorized model of institutions. Institutions remain a “‘black box’ model,” and habitus only partly fills the gap between the micro and macro level, between actors and structure (Jenkins, 2002). In addition, several of the forms of capital with which Bourdieu operates are rather ill-defined or underdeveloped (Schuller, Baron, & Field, 2000). I read these traits as an invitation to borrow and elaborate. In this endeavor, media sociology that deals with source strategies is seen as useful in addressing the aforementioned problems. It must be emphasized that I do not see public relations only as media relations. However, the main advantage of the literature in this area is that it helps to analyze the symbolic struggles that take place with the assistance of public relations, i.e., the way that sources compete for access to the media and for symbolic dominance in the media arena. The work of sources can be regarded as a continual struggle to mobilize unequally distributed resources to gain access (Cottle, 2003; Davis, 2002; Schlesinger, 1990; Schlesinger & Tumber, 1994). It is argued here, however, that the resources used in media relations also have relevance for other public relations
activities, such as lobbying and community relations, to name two examples.

The struggle to gain media access is obviously related to the central position that the media have been accorded in modern society, both as material- and symbol-producing institutions. Media research has traditionally focused on the so-called agenda-setting function of the media and their influence on public attitudes. The media direct attention to certain issues at the cost of others, and they influence the ranking of these issues in hierarchies (Dalton, Beck, Huckfeldt, & Koetzle, 1998; McCombs, 2004). In general, most of the research on the influence of the media that goes beyond the agenda-setting function concludes that the media are important for public attitudes, policy makers, and the public policy process, but that their effects are complex and not necessarily direct (Ihlen, 2001a; McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 2002; Waldahl, 1999). However, one crucial aspect here is that the media does orchestrate debates about the environment: some actors and perspectives are given space or time on the air, whereas others are not. Actors also gain or lose legitimacy in this process.

The following sections draw together some of Bourdieu’s writing on resources with insights from media sociology. The importance of institutionalization, economic capital, knowledge capital, social capital, and symbolic capital is also discussed.

**Institutionalization**

An organization’s resources may be regarded as coming into play initially in the way it is institutionalized. One may question the degree to which there exists “cognitive, normative, and regulative structures and activities that provide stability and meaning” in an organization (Scott, 1995, p. 33). Here, an organization is understood as encompassing attempts by a number of individuals to coordinate certain tasks, including communication, to reach a goal (Bruzelius & Skärvad, 2000). This implies a certain permanency and that certain types of roles are assigned to
participants in the simplest sense. Organizations may, however, differ in their degree of institutionalization. The simplest operationalization is to look at an organization’s human resources, that is, to ask whether an organization has employees and, if so, how many. In the case of membership-based organizations, its number of members is obviously relevant. One aspect of institutionalization in this sense could also be called “human capital.”

Stability is also an important aspect of institutionalization. An organization benefits from a high degree of stability when coping with long-lived issues. Typically, the resources of a citizen group are drained when a planning process is dragged out, as can be seen in a number of environmental conflicts (Ihlen, 2004b). However, this may also give the group the chance to build up its competence.

Other aspects of institutionalization include specialization and routinization. Permanent activity most often leads to routinization and to different tasks being accorded to different members of the organization. An important indicator is whether an organization has routinized its public relations activity or whether it has its resources bound up in other day-to-day activities. This may also be seen as a question of priority, of course, and thus as an indicator of the level of sophistication with regard to communication and its importance for an organization. In short, it becomes important to focus on how an organization handles its public relations and if it has a designated public relations manager or a public relations department. The relationship between the public relations function and management is also pivotal here. To what degree does management engage in public relations and see it as a major part of its role?

*Economic Capital*

Closely tied to the ability to institutionalize an organization is economic capital, which, in contrast to other forms of capital, may be disengaged from the same organization. Bourdieu saw
this rather self-explanatory concept as being at the root of all of the other types of capital, but refrained from reducing everything to just this type, just as he rejected the notion that all social exchange could be reduced to communication (Bourdieu, 1986).

The importance of economic capital can be seen in the fact that, even in a free market system, free speech is only effective if actors can establish a substantial presence, and this most often requires resources, often of the financial kind (Condit & Condit, 1992; Coombs, 1993; Rakow, 1989). An important question is how much a source is willing or able to invest in, for instance, media relations. Is the organization able to supply information subsidies, that is, press packages, press releases, and other tools to facilitate journalists’ write-up of stories (Gandy, 1980)? The blooming business of public relations agencies also gives rise to the question of whether organizations have the ability to hire such expertise.

However, public relations does not necessarily have to be expensive to be effective. The position and amount of media coverage that relatively resource-poor environmental organizations have secured over the years is a case in point. Public relations has, in general, given rise to two conflicting trends. On the one hand, already powerful sources have used it to consolidate their privileged access. On the other hand, alternative sources have also been able to utilize it to gain access (Davis, 2000). Public relations, or at least media relations, is relatively cheap and bound up in the cost of labor--something that even poor volunteer organizations can theoretically accommodate (Davis, 2002). The aforementioned degree of institutionalization, in this case active members, together with the form of capital discussed below, may act as a counterweight to the influence of economic capital. In a Norwegian study of a conflict over energy and the environment, a very poor environmental ad-hoc organization was able to claim victory against its adversary, which was backed by the three largest Norwegian companies. This
was simply due to its clever use of public relations (Ihlen, 2004b).

*Knowledge Capital*

A consistent focus in Bourdieu is on the field of education, as it is here that the values and relations of social space are passed on from one generation to the next (Bourdieu, 1984). In the field of education, cultural capital (or informational capital) is what matters. Cultural capital may be embodied, objectified, or institutionalized. That is, it may be related to individuals, by, for instance, professional knowledge, verbal facility, or general cultural awareness. It may be related to objects, such as books or computers. Moreover, institutions such as libraries and elite schools carry cultural capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In media sociology, however, cultural capital has been understood to take the form of “legitimacy, authoritativeness, respectability, and the contacts which these bring” (Schlesinger, 1990, p. 81).

It does seem, however, that cultural capital in Bourdieu’s conception of it often has as much to do with refinement and, an extension of this, taste, as it does with a body of knowledge. In studying public relations strategies, the latter aspect is more interesting, and thus I write here of knowledge capital, rather than cultural capital. This is not to imply that culture is an unimportant resource for power, but, in this context, it is more a question of knowing the culture of politics and the media.

The importance of knowledge in a wider sense can be seen, for instance, when citizen groups meet with accusations that they do not know what they are talking about or that they must be “constructive” in their criticisms. Having “enough” education to pose the “right type” (constructive) of criticism seems to be an essential strategy for being taken seriously by actors who are struggling to present their definitions and perspectives (Kolbenstvedt, Strand, & Østensen, 1978). However, the greater responsibility for comprehensive research efforts clearly
lies with the resourced, well-institutionalized party.

A particular type of knowledge capital concerns an acquaintance with the way in which the political process works and knowing how to lobby. Valuable knowledge includes insight into when politicians are most open to argument and most in need of counter-expertise to balance the information from the administration. An organization will be strengthened by its general ability to read the political power game, with its alliance building and competition for office and the need to appeal to certain constituencies that might be valuable for traditional or strategic reasons.

Another important type of knowledge is knowledge of how the media work. It has, for instance, been widely recognized that certain attributes are seen to make a story newsworthy. Events should, for instance, resonate with widely held cultural values, be recent, dramatic, conflict-oriented, tangible, illustratable, and/or tied to an action-oriented political agenda (Ihlen, 1999; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Appeals to news values are often pointed out as the most common source strategy, and they take the form of either creating events that conform to news values or of presenting events to journalists in ways that meet news values (Palmer, 2000). Many sources, for instance, acknowledge that the media appreciate hard-hitting rhetoric that intensifies conflicts (Ihlen, 2001b). By establishing a positive media profile, an organization may be able to overcome traditional institutional disadvantages. As noted above, public relations thus offers far greater potential for non-official sources than has previously been acknowledged. In fact, it could be argued that the dissemination of professional public relations has the potential to broaden, rather than restrict, media access for non-official source groups. A caveat is that there are also many interest groups and individuals who do not have access to even the minimum resources required (Davis, 2002).

It is, however, important to bear in mind that the importance of media coverage should
not be overemphasized. First of all, as mentioned earlier in this section, media research has shown that there is no one-to-one relationship between media content and public attitudes. Furthermore, having “won” in the media arena does not guarantee the outcome of a political debate (Cracknell, 1993). This was illustrated in a study of how environmental organizations succeeded in getting their opposition to the development of a hydropower plant to dominate in the media. The politicians, nonetheless, ended up voting for the development, albeit for a smaller one than was initially planned (Ihlen, 2001c).

**Social Capital**

Social capital has been a social science buzzword for some time (e.g., Baron, Field, & Schuller, 2000; Field, 2002; Lin, 2002) (see also the chapter on Putnam in this volume). The concept is most often used to describe the resources and the degree of shared values and trust within the community. Social capital thus shifts attention away from an analysis of individual behavior to a focus on patterns of relationships between, for instance, individuals and organizations (Baron et al., 2000). This relational aspect is, of course, also important for Bourdieu, but he uses the concept differently:

Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 248-249).

This definition has several important implications. Social capital must be understood as having two components: first, the size of the network that a person possesses and, second, the
volume of the capital that the other components of the network have and to which a person obtains access through the network. Social capital is seen as the result of a conscious or unconscious investment strategy that involves exchanges of, for instance, gifts, services, words, time, attention, care, or concern. It also implies “obligations” or “credit.” The members of a network can subjectively feel gratitude, respect, or friendship; the relationship can also be formalized in the form of legal rights and obligations. The credit can be called on, but without a guarantee that it will be recognized. Investment in social capital definitely involves risk. From a narrow economic perspective, investment in social capital seems to be pointless because it may yield interest only in the long run. However, there are several “goods” and “services” that cannot be obtained without social capital, and this capital must be well-established before the need for it appears, “as if for [its] own sake, and therefore outside [its] period of use” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 252).

Social capital is also seen as important in that it can contribute to the bottom line of an organization. It may lead to increased and/or more complex forms of social capital, reduced transaction costs, and organizational advantage in the form of, for instance, increased productivity and efficiency (Hazelton Jr. & Kennan, 2000). To research an organization’s social capital, it may be possible to pose several questions drawing on Bourdieu and other writings on social capital (e.g., Lin, 2002). It is, for instance, possible to ask what kind of investment an organization makes in social capital. How does it attempt to strengthen its connections with politicians, journalists, activist groups, bureaucrats, researchers, and other organizations? The number of meetings and the time and money spent organizing them could be used as an indicator.

Another question would be: What is the size of an organization’s network? How many
connections does the organization have to the publics mentioned above, and how does it compare with similar organizations? At the same time, one obviously needs to be sensitive to the fact that one “good” contact may be all that is needed to, for instance, shift a political decision. A study of a particularly successful public relations campaign showed how an environmental organization benefited from and worked actively to involve persons beyond the circle of what the activists themselves called “the usual suspects” (Ihlen, 2004b, p. 291).

Further general questions include the kinds of capital that an organization potentially has access to through its membership in a network. For instance, what professional standing (symbolic) or expertise (cultural) do the other organizations in this network have? How does the organization under study gain access to this through the network? Some organizations may, for instance, have good knowledge about lobbying and possess good political contacts. By sharing this knowledge and these contacts with other members in the network, a capital transfer takes place, which illustrates the value of social capital. In a huge conflict over a hydropower development in Norway, it was shown that a local ad-hoc organization benefited from associating with an established environmental organization in terms of political contacts and lobbying know-how (Ihlen, 2004b).

**Symbolic Capital**

Among the pillars of Bourdieu’s work is his judgment of taste. Here, symbolic capital is defined as “a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 291). Elsewhere, it is stated that all other types of capital take the form of symbolic capital when they are “grasped through categories of perception that recognize its specific logic or, if you prefer, misrecognise the arbitrariness of its possession and accumulation [original emphasis]” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119). Although symbolic capital has its
roots in other types of capital, it is a form of “denied” capital, as it conceals the underlying interested relations. Symbolic capital is subjective, in contrast to other forms, and it is perceived as making legitimate demands for recognition. Symbolic capital legitimates power relations (Bourdieu, 1990b).

The roots of the symbolic capital within the other forms of capital can be elaborated upon. For instance, social capital always functions as symbolic capital, because it is “governed by the logic of knowledge and acknowledgement” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 257). Indeed, the various forms of capital may often be difficult to separate, but the reputation that an individual or organization acquires for being “well-connected” is obviously symbolic capital. The same goes for the reputation for being knowledgeable. Furthermore, symbolic capital may be acquired with the help of knowledge capital (cultural capital) by way of a prestigious education.

As for institutionalization, it may be said that this is made into symbolic capital in the sense of the legitimacy and credibility that is accorded to institutionalized, official sources, which are taken more seriously by journalists. A concrete example concerning the aforementioned Norwegian environmental organization is the way in which an ad hoc group fighting against the building of a specific hydroelectric power plant received comparatively less coverage than did older and more established environmental organizations (Ihlen, 2001b). Thus, the older and more institutionalized an organization is, the better its chances of being established as part of the “naturalized” source network of journalists. With institutionalization comes symbolic capital.

Traditionally, it has been easier to acquire symbolic capital through cultural capital than through economic capital. The achievements and legitimacy of the latter may be weakened by inheritance.
The Reworked Typology of Capital

Drawing together the preceding section on different forms of capital, the following questions can be asked in an analysis of organizational public relations.

(1) To what degree is an organization institutionalized? Questions can be asked about the nature of the organization’s human resources, the size of its administration, the number of members or employees it has, the number of people engaged in public relations, and also how it compares to similar organizations or to its competitors.

(2) What kind of economic capital does an organization have? This can be defined as the organization’s budget. In addition, it is interesting to look at how much of this budget is channeled toward public relations. A large budget may make it possible to supply information subsidies or hire external public relations expertise. Figures can be presented and comparisons made between different organizations.

(3) What kind of knowledge capital does an organization have? Knowledge capital is here defined as formal professional education or informal skills acquired through practice. This, then, is a broader category than the cultural capital or cultural refinement discussed by Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1984). It is instead focused on the formal and informal education, skills, and experience that are represented in the organization. In particular, it is interesting to assess what kind of public relations expertise the organization has and how this compares with that of other organizations in the same field. Knowledge of how to lobby and how to gain media coverage is seen as pivotal, the latter because the media are so central to modern society as both material- and symbol-producing institutions.

(4) What kind of social capital does an organization have? For Bourdieu, social capital comprised, in essence, group membership and the credentials and credit that followed from it
(Bourdieu, 1986). Important aspects are the size of the network an actor possesses and the volume of capital that can be accessed through the other parties in the network. The size of the investment that an organization has made in social capital is also of interest. This type of capital can also be assessed qualitatively, in terms of the type of connections that an organization has with competitors, politicians, journalists, bureaucrats, researchers, and other relevant groups. The nature of the capital that can be accessed through the network is also of interest, and, again, comparisons can be made among organizations.

(5) What kind of symbolic capital does an organization have? Symbolic capital is defined as “a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 291). This means that all of the other forms of capital may also function as and feed into the volume of symbolic capital that an organization has. Symbolic capital can be analyzed qualitatively as an organization’s social standing, prestige, and legitimacy, most typically as expressed by other central actors and/or the media.

Summing up, the relevance of the above for public relations lies first and foremost in the possibility of analyzing the different forms of power positions that are constructed with the help of capital and public relations. An organization’s resources can obviously be conceptualized in other ways than is done here. The most important point remains that current public relations theory often offers no good ontology; material existence has no role, as has been pointed out (Cheney & Christensen, 2001). This concern can be addressed with the concept of fields and a typology of resources or capital. Coupled with the concept of fields, the suggested typology is an important contribution to public relations theory.

It is also suggested that this theory can help to inform practice. Here, three brief points related to strategic thinking are made (Webb et al., 2001).
Self-reflexivity: first, to succeed, an actor needs a certain self-reflexive (not understood in Luhmann’s sense of the term, which is explored in Chapter Three) understanding of his or her position and resources within a field.

Understanding of social rules and regulations: second, an actor benefits from being aware of the rules, regulations, and official and unofficial forms of capital that characterize a field.

Ability to negotiate: third, an actor has to be able to maneuver and negotiate conditions within a field given its own forms of capital and those of its competitors.

These three elements together amount to what can be called cultural literacy (Schirato and Yell, as cited in Webb et al. [2001]). They can also be seen as elements of a strategic and sophisticated public relations practice.

Conclusion

To frame an organization’s public relations activities, the concept of fields was borrowed from sociology and from the work of Pierre Bourdieu. In keeping with this perspective, an organization may be seen as located within one or several fields, in which they compete to position themselves in the social order. The actors seek to get their issues discussed, defined, and settled.

In this struggle within fields, an organization draws on different types of capital. It has been argued in this chapter that there is a need for a reworked typology that also incorporates insights from media sociology, as this discipline has focused more on the capital that organizations hold. A prime advantage of drawing on Bourdieu, rather than on other analyses of resources, is his emphasis on relational and dynamic aspects. The positions of actors are seen in relation to one another and explained as functions of the types and amounts of capital they hold, the field-specific appreciation of these forms of capital, and their constant attempts to acquire,
hold on to, or convert their capital.

Further research should seek to develop richer and more stringent categories for an analysis of different forms of capital and their relations to the specific fields within which organizations operate. Because they are decisive to public relations practice, these forms of capital need to be better understood, better integrated, and further researched. Such studies would assist scholars and practitioners alike and help to bring about a more realistic perspective on the field of public relations.
References


4. On Bourdieu

Bourdieu. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.


Box 1

Life and Work of Pierre Bourdieu

Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002). Born in Denguin, in the Béarn district of Southern France. Studied anthropology at the École Normale Supérieure (ENS) from 1951–1954. Conducted anthropological fieldwork among the Kabyle people in Algeria and taught at the University of Algiers. Research interest veered towards sociology, and his first book, published in 1958, was entitled Sociologie de l’Algérie. Returned to France in 1960 and worked for a year as an assistant professor [Ed note: Is this correct?] at the University of Paris. This was followed by three years at the University of Lille. Returned to Paris in 1964 as Director of Studies at l’École Pratique des Hautes Etudes. Founded the Centre de Sociologie Européenne in 1968. First major text was published in 1972, Esquisse d’une Theorie de la Pratique (Outline of a Theory of Practice [1977]). In 1979 published La Distinction, Critique Sociale du Jugement (Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste [1984]), which established his reputation outside of France. Appointed to professor of sociology at the Collège de France in 1981.

Footnote

1 A previous version of this chapter was published in Public Relations Review 33(3), 2007 as “Building on Bourdieu: A sociological grasp of public relations.”