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Habitus and Cultural Fit in Higher Education. Explaining the Genesis and Reproduction of Educational Inequalities Through Bourdieu's Conflict Theory

ABSTRACT: This article addresses the phenomenon of educational inequality, which it attempts to explain through the application of the conflict theoretical perspective. First, I will discuss the rational choice approach which is often used in quantitative educational research on educational inequality. In contrast, I will then outline how educational inequality can be explained from the perspective of Bourdieu's concepts. I will focus on the phenomenon of cultural fit and share insights from my empirical research study, *"The fine differences in school careers."* In conclusion, I will argue for an inequality-reflective school development perspective, which places at its centre the awareness that phenomena of educational inequality cannot be explained exclusively by rational choices.

KEYWORDS: educational inequality, school development, Bourdieu, habitus, rational choice

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INTRODUCTION & OUTLINE OF THE PROBLEM

This article discusses the issue of the reproduction of educational inequalities within the framework of a sociological approach with a special focus on school biographical transitions in Austria's school system. Research on transition is particularly focused on early selection in multi-level school systems and the associated disadvantage of individual groups, such as pupils from deprived backgrounds (Helsper et al., 2009; Liegmann, Mammes & Racherbäumer, 2014; Kramer, 2017). Large-scale studies (PISA; TIMSS; PIRLS) show the importance of transition as a mechanism for the reproduction of educational inequalities (Liegmann, Mammes & Racherbäumer, 2014). These studies point out the persistent phenomenon of a strong correlation between students' family background and their access to higher education (Bacher & Moosbrugger, 2019) as well as their academic performance (Wimmer & Oberwimmer, 2021). This is particularly evident in the Austrian school system with its multi-level structure of lower and upper secondary schools. Austrian pupils have to transit to a new type of school twice – once at the age of 10 (to lower secondary school) and then at the age of 14 (to upper secondary school). The admission to both subdivisions is based on the pupils' previous performance. In addition, it is crucial that the structure of the lower secondary level is further divided into two different academic standards (regular middle school versus lower secondary school for higher education). The upper secondary level is mainly subdivided into school types that end with the high school diploma, and these upper secondary schools have a more academically oriented school environment (Schreiner & Breit, 2014). Data show that once students find themselves in the less academically oriented track (regular middle school), they are more likely to remain there and less likely to obtain a high school diploma (Wimmer & Oberwimmer, 2021). It is also remarkable that regular middle schools are disproportionately attended by students from less privileged families (Wimmer & Oberwimmer, 2021). In this context, it can be argued that the normative and legally central principle that children's socio-economic background should not block access to education is almost diametrically contradictory, according to the results of large-scale research (Rieser, 2011). Therefore, this article will address explanations of educational inequality in the quantitative research discourse of German-speaking countries. For this purpose, the often-used rational choice model

will be discussed first to follow up with how profoundly this approach can explain educational inequality. This is followed by a discussion of an alternative explanatory concept that focuses on the implicit and hidden mechanisms of the emergence and reproduction of educational inequality based on the conflict theory of Pierre Bourdieu. Its relevance will be illustrated through a short outline of the research project, *The fine differences in school careers*. This approach, I argue, allows us to explain the mechanisms of inequality at school from a different heuristic perspective, which does not place the exclusive responsibility for school failure on students and their families.

RATIONAL CHOICE APPROACHES IN GERMAN-SPEAKING RESEARCH ON EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY

In the research discourse of German-speaking countries, educational inequality is often explained by referring to the different starting conditions related to pupils' socio-economic backgrounds (Gomolla, 2010). In quantitative empirical educational research, there is a particularly strong focus on the family educational aspiration to explain the unequal representation of students in higher education (Kramer, 2017). In the Austrian context, Bacher and Moosbrugger (2019) argue that early educational pathway decisions trigger a particularly strong effect of origin. This effect refers to the situation whereby families from higher social classes are more likely to choose a lower secondary school for higher education (academically oriented) for their children, despite the fact that their kids do not necessarily show the required academic performance in the past (Bacher and Moosbrugger, 2019). At the same time, children from the working class or immigrant backgrounds are more likely to end up at a regular middle school (less academically oriented) (Bacher and Moosbrugger, 2019). Wulf Hopf (2014) points out that such quantitative empirical research perspectives are based on a rational-choice approach. At the center of such approaches is the assumption that students' family background has a primary effect on school performance and, in the sense of a secondary effect of origin, on the family's educational aspirations (Boudon, 1974). Educational path decisions are thus explained by cost-benefit models, status preservation motives, and personal educational motivation (Helsper et al., 2010). These research approaches explain educational choices based on the concept that human action is fundamentally rational and conscious (Helsper et al., 2010). Underlying this approach is the assumption that family aspirations for education can trigger a process of self-selection, implying in fact that it is families themselves who are finally responsible for unequal opportunities of their children's access to and participation in higher education. Based on these explanations, it could be concluded that the aforementioned effects of origin can be used as an empirical model to answer questions about the emergence and reproduction of educational inequalities (Kramer, 2013). However, it must be objected here that an analysis of data on educational participation based on a rational choice approach does not illuminate the mechanisms which are responsible for the emergence and re-

production of social inequalities in the school system (Dietrich, Heinrich & Thieme, 2013). According to Kramer, it can be argued that there is an inherent problem in science in order to explain educational inequality (Kramer, 2013). At the centre is the question of why, despite ongoing discussions and educational policy reforms, there is an enduring and transnational entrenchment of the phenomenon of socioeconomic and sociocultural inequality in school participation (Kramer, 2013).

Another approach to explaining educational inequality draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu. He suggests that there are unconscious and implicit preconceptions of students, which are linked to different educational attitudes and strategies, which can thus lead to unequal opportunities for participation in the school system (Helsper et al., 2010). From the perspective of Bourdieu's sociology, the previously mentioned self-selection is explicitly not contradicted. It is the primary effects of origins that need to be at the centre of the analysis, pointing to a discrepancy between the habitus of lower social classes and the habitus demanded by the educational system itself (Hopf, 2014). From this point of view, school path decisions are not explained by cost-benefit calculations, but rather these decisions are embedded in a certain educational habitus, which has been generated in long and deep-rooted socialization processes (Hopf, 2014). Drawing from this, it is considered that prior to any conscious decision, unequal preconditions for participation or success in schooling already exist at the level of a certain habitus (Helsper et al., 2010). This argument aims to raise questions about the school system's role in generating and reproducing inequality. Such a critical educational approach can be used to ask what role mechanisms of discrimination and exclusion play in the context of social class (Kramer, 2011). At the centre of this statement is the observation that there are specific social logics of adaptation and interaction between the educational system and the system of social classes (Kramer, 2017). The question can be raised about which interaction and fitting processes can be identified between structure (school) and subject (student) (Hopf, 2014).

HABITUS AND THE CULTURAL FIT IN THE FIELD OF SCHOOLING

Bourdieu conceptualises the habitus as a connecting link between subject and structure (Bourdieu, 1987). In this relational perspective, habitus is the product of culture- and history-specific social situations and conditions of existence on the one hand and the basis of production for human actions, practices, and cultural products of all kinds on the other (Kramer, 2019). For the purposes of this article, habitus is conceptualised as a partial habitus that specifically manifests itself in relation to its (partial) social field of the school (Kramer, 2019). This is why the term "student habitus" is used here. Bourdieu's framework seems to be particularly useful in pointing out the relationship between the congruence of behavioural, thoughts, and perception patterns of class-specific student habitus and the demanded structures and expectations of the school as an institution. This perspective refers to the primarily implicit and atheoretical knowledge of the students, which is linked to different attitudes and

strategies in the sense of a student habitus and thus leads to unequal opportunities for participation in the education system (Kramer, 2011). This phenomenon is based on available cultural and social capital and thus on a habitus that is more likely to be found in the upper social classes (Möller et al., 2020). In the context of educational participation, this perspective asks about the logic of demands and expectations exhibited in the course of everyday school life and how these interact with the habitus of different students (Kramer, 2011). To frame this phenomenon conceptually, we can speak of the term “*cultural fit*” (Budde, 2012). Kramer (2013) describes this as the clash of a primary student habitus (which emerges in the child’s immediate family) with a secondary habitus (which is formed in and demanded by the schools). If we look at the previous points from the perspective of educational inequality, cultural fit can be understood as a mechanism of valuation or devaluation between middle- and upper-class-oriented school requirement logic and class-specific habitus and attitudes of different social actors (Lipkina, 2019). In this context, it can be assumed that a homologous cultural fit leads to the confirmation and consolidation of a primary habitus (Kramer, 2011). In the case of an antagonistic cultural fit, it can be assumed that the primary student habitus is under pressure to transform, which could manifest itself in forms of resistance and deviation from the expectations of the educational institution (Kramer, 2011). And this, in turn, could lead to exclusion from education (drop-out). This mechanism could be discussed in terms of self-elimination, except that the question of responsibility cannot easily be passed on to the social actors. Rather, according to the approach that draws on Bourdieu that is explained here, we need to shift our attention to institutional discrimination based on middle- and upper-class-oriented expectations and norms.

INSIGHTS FROM THE PROJECT: “*THE FINE DIFFERENCES IN SCHOOL CAREERS*”

Based on the previous explanations and the theoretical framework of Bourdieu’s conflict theory, the following section will give an insight into the research project: “*The fine differences in school careers.*” As a starting point for this research project, it is assumed that middle and high schools’ school cultures differ significantly in their academic orientation (Ditton & Aulinger, 2011). Students who transition from middle school to upper secondary school (academically oriented schools that lead to the high school diploma) face a particular academic educational challenge. In this context, it can be assumed that these teenagers may be at a double disadvantage. On the one hand, family socialisation may have a limiting effect on the primary student habitus, and on the other hand, former middle school students may be at a disadvantage because the logic of requirements at their original school does not match up with those of the new school to which they are transitioning (higher upper school). In this project, 10 former middle school students were interviewed 12 weeks after their transition to such upper secondary school. All students were 14 years old at the time of the interviews. The interviews were designed as narrative and problem-centred inter-

views and took place between November and December 2019. On average, the conversations lasted 25 – 30 minutes. Structured questions were used in the interviews, which addressed the following topics: 1. *What were their experiences and expectations before as well as during the first weeks of school?*; 2. *How did the transition to the new school make them feel?*; 3. *What differences in learning workload and other challenges did the students feel, compared to the old school (middle school)*. These interview questions aim at answering the following research questions: a) What kinds of student habitus show themselves during such specific transitions between different types of schools (from a less academic-oriented middle school to a more academic-oriented upper secondary school)?; b) How can the results of this research contribute to what is referred to as an inequality-reflective school development?

In methodological terms, the concept of habitus needs to be understood as an implicit and atheoretical concept. This premise puts the habitus concept in frontal opposition to rational and conscious human action assumptions. Furthermore, it can be assumed that habitus has a practice-generating power (*modus operandi*), and therefore it leaves so-called social traces in all its actions (*opus operatum*) (Lange-Vester & Teiwes-Kügler, 2013). For the reconstruction of student habitus, these traces are the essential objects of interest. The main central premise is that the interview transcripts can be considered as an *opus operatum*. This is based on the fact that the interview questions aimed at getting young people to position themselves through their answers to the (new) field of upper secondary school (Kramer, 2019). In order to analyse habitus and its practice-generating power, the sequence analytical habitus reconstruction, according to Kramer (2018), was used. The essence of this method is a sequence-analytic procedure that focuses on the formation of testable hypotheses about the specific student habitus in the interview transcript. For this purpose, an interview is broken down into individual thematic passages, and these are then further subdivided into individual sequences (Kramer, 2018). Along with these individual sequences, the attempt is made to interpret the material through hypothetical theses (Kramer, 2018). This procedure is to confirm or deny the respective habitus hypothesis in the sequence structure of the empirical material (Kowalski, 2020). The crucial point is that where a hypothesis is not able to explain the continuation in the sequence structure, it must be excluded and rejected. With this proceeding, a hypothesis emerges sequence by sequence, one that can most closely explain the practice-generating power of habitus. After a habitus hypothesis is verified, a summary formulation for the respective case is described as a case portrait at the end of sequence analysis (Kramer, 2018). This specific method was applied to three cases out of the 10 interviews, and thus three individual cases could be reconstructed. Afterwards, these individual case portraits were compared with each other in a contrasting case comparison along with maximum and minimum contrasts. Methodologically, this step aims at highlighting higher aggregated conclusions from the individual cases so that the results of the individual cases can be condensed into more general types (Kramer, 2018). Within the procedure, the following three types of school transition could be identified:

- a) *conformist and sovereign transition*
- b) *tense and aspiring transition*
- c) *risky and overwhelming transition.*

Conformist and sovereign transition type: This type is characterised by young people's strong orientation towards conformity and norms. At the same time, they are able to cope with the challenges of the change of school form through certain sovereignty, which is limited by an attitude of frugality. Their academic and educational aspirations are oriented towards the middle of the range, and therefore these students are not expected to perform at an educationally excellent or distinctive level. These young people also see themselves in charge of their school performance.

Tense and aspiring transition type: This type is characterised young people's increased educational aspiration. A high level of personal responsibility ensures their specific school performance. Because of the challenges they face when making the transition, they also experience increased pressure to adapt and therefore do not succeed in achieving above-average academic performance. This is why these students also show moments of excessive pressure and heavy exposure.

Risky and overwhelming transition type: This type is characterised by having the lowest cultural fit. These young people experience a risky transition to school and are most at risk of school exclusion due to their low connectivity. They lack not only the academic achievements that the new school expects but also have too little sense of the rules in the new social field of the upper secondary school. These young students are also ones who see themselves as the least responsible when it comes to their success at school.

In the three types, it is apparent that all students experienced a more or less tense transition to their new school. Depending on the particular cultural fit of the reconstructed students' primary habitus, this tension could be resolved or reduced. In all three cases, the increased academic standards at the new school were a central anchor. In other words, it can be shown that school transfer largely depends on how capable and willing students are to perform after they transfer schools. On the implicit level of a habitus, this means that it is of high importance for a successful school transition that the new students bring along a strong sense of personal responsibility. In other words, the schools expect that students should have incorporated the meritocratic principle of performance. All interviews showed that the new school gives the students the responsibility for their academic success. Therefore, the three types can be unfolded along an axis of the meritocratic principle of performance. But this mechanism, with its associated obligation to individuals, is, of course, highly questionable.

SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK

The aim of this article is to contribute to our understanding of the reproduction of educational inequality through a conflict theoretical perspective and its concrete application in an empirical study in the Austrian context. The results of this study

show that educational pathway decisions as a single mechanism for the emergence of inequality in the school system do not offer satisfactory explanatory capacity. The primarily rational-choice approaches can only provide a limited explanation for the emergence and reproduction of educational inequality. Shifting the focus onto school culture and cultural fit of the primary and secondary habitus has proven to be particularly valuable (Helsper & Kramer, 2010). Based on the study, *The fine differences in school careers* (Pham-Xuan, 2022), it was shown that rational and conscious decisions could not simply explain a successful transition to an upper secondary school for higher education. Rather, focusing on habitus allowed to identify that particularly high connectivity to the standards and expectations of the new school was necessary for a successful transition. This article has attempted to show that the theoretical architecture of rational choice approaches is limited in the sense that the primary and secondary effects of social origin are both located on the second level of observation. This means that abilities, school performance, perceptions, and interpretations of the (Austrian) school system are the products and documentations of a habitus that has to be understood as the first level of observation (Kramer, 2013).

In conclusion, reference can be made once again to the issue of the meritocratic principle. Schools cannot expect such an assumption of responsibility from their students; rather, their task is to support the development of skills and competences in such ways that allow young people to assume a sense of responsibility for their own success at school (Stojanov, 2011). If schools have an interest in ensuring that their (new) students have a successful school biography, school development processes must be inequality-reflective. This means that schools can think about how they design the transition and their demands and expectations for new students. These considerations, in turn, must take place in consideration of the fact that all students are unequal in their habitual disposition and also in their capacity for adaptation.

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**HABITUS I DOPASOWANIE KULTUROWE W SZKOLNICTWIE WYŻSZYM.
WYJAŚNIENIE GENEZY I REPRODUKЦИИ NIERÓWNOŚCI EDUKACYJNYCH
ZA POMOCĄ TEORII KONFLIKTU BOURDIEU**

ABSTRAKT: Niniejszy artykuł dotyczy zjawiska nierówności edukacyjnych, które próbuję wyjaśnić poprzez zastosowanie perspektywy teoretycznej konfliktu. Najpierw omówię podejście racjonalnego wyboru, które jest często stosowane w ilościowych badaniach edukacyjnych dotyczących nierówności edukacyjnych. Następnie nakreślę, w jaki sposób nierówności edukacyjne mogą być objaśniane z perspektywy koncepcji Bourdieu. Skoncentruję się na zjawisku dopasowania kulturowego i podzielę się spostrzeżeniami z mojego badania empirycznego „Drobne różnice w kulturze”.

W podsumowaniu będę opowiadać się za perspektywą rozwoju szkoły odzwierciedlającą nierówności, która w swoim centrum stawia świadomość, że zjawisk nierówności edukacyjnych nie da się wyjaśnić wyłącznie za pomocą racjonalnych wyborów.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: nierówności edukacyjne, rozwój szkoły, Bourdieu, habitus, racjonalny wybór