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# Uncovering Hegemony in Higher Education: A Critical Appraisal of the Use of “Institutional Habitus” in Empirical Scholarship

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## Abstract

This article critically examines the empirical scholarship that applies institutional habitus, a conceptual extension of Bourdieu's theory of practice, to investigations of higher education. Given Bourdieu's extensive scholarly focus on higher education as well as the field's undertheorization of its own exclusionary history, application of institutional habitus to higher education is particularly apt. This critical appraisal finds that the reviewed scholarship corroborates the concept's value by drawing attention to the role of institutional habitus in differentially privileging and rewarding students based on their possession of institutionally legitimized knowledge, values, and behaviors. Nevertheless, this review reveals a series of missed opportunities, including a tendency to conflate individual and institutional habitus and limited attention to the impact of institutions' own social status. These oversights dampen the theoretical and empirical richness of the concept and obscure a significant influence on institutional beliefs and behavior as well as a mechanism of exclusion for marginalized populations. After discussing contributions and critiques of the reviewed scholarship, I propose a definition of institutional habitus that centers the social position of educational institutions as the primary avenue through which social power influences institutional practice and offer a set of guiding principles to inform the application

of institutional habitus within education research. It is argued that such robust operationalization of institutional habitus would greatly enhance organizational analysis within educational contexts by helping scholars and practitioners to identify and remediate the institutional mechanisms that facilitate student failure. In clarifying this problem, different, and perhaps more equitable, solutions may emerge.

Keywords [institutional habitus](#), [higher education](#), [educational inequity](#), [Bourdieu](#), [organizational analysis](#), [education research](#)

Pierre Bourdieu's scholarship has been embraced in explorations of educational inequities in a variety of national settings and in educational contexts that range from early childhood to adult education ([Bailey & Dynarski, 2011](#); [Furlong & Cartmel, 2009](#); [Horn & Berger, 2004](#); [Light & Strayer, 2002](#); [Schofer & Meyer, 2005](#); [Shavit, 2007](#); [Tett, 2004](#)). These studies identify ways in which educational institutions recognize, reward, and inculcate systems of thought and behavior that [Bourdieu \(1974\)](#) termed *habitus*, a "system of implicit and deeply interiorized values which . . . helps to define attitudes towards the cultural capital and educational institutions" (p. 32). *Habitus* helps to link social power relations to individual decisions, experiences, and practices within education. Investigations of educational inequity that apply habitus attend to a critical yet underutilized element of [Bourdieu's \(1977b\)](#) theory of practice.

Much of the education research that engages habitus focuses on individual habitus (e.g., [Gaddis, 2013](#); [Reay, 2004](#)). Yet, the concept offers room for elaboration as *institutional habitus*, which expands on habitus to attend to ways in which power and culture influence institutional action. A limited number of scholars have applied institutional habitus in higher education research to investigate the ways in which social power, acting through educational institutions, interacts with student habitus and generates differential educational experiences and outcomes, thereby linking these realities to the broader social context in which they exist. The aim of this article is to critically appraise the empirical scholarship in which institutional habitus is employed to explore higher education decision making, transitions, experiences, and outcomes.

Based on my analysis, I argue that institutional habitus as currently employed in higher education scholarship conflates institutional habitus with individual habitus, which misattributes the source of its influence. Much of the reviewed scholarship frames the concept as the influence of a class group as mediated through an educational setting. Although this conceptualization has important uses, I assert that institutional habitus must be understood not merely as reflection of a collective, yet individual, class-based habitus but as an outgrowth of an institution's social position—that is, the opportunities and restrictions associated with an institution's status within its own hierarchically organized social spaces. It is the institution's social status rather than its students' that should be centered with institutional habitus. Schools' social positions are shaped by their possession of various capitals (i.e., valued economic, social, cultural, and reputational resources) that place them in differential status positions relative to each other. These positions influence organizational self-concept, including assumptions about institutional capacities and challenges and perceptions of students. The influence of such beliefs on institutional behavior and decision making is institutional habitus, which centers the interplay of institutional position and practice as situated within the hierarchical social spaces (i.e., fields) that influence this interplay.

This argument proceeds in four parts. First, after a summary of Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural reproduction, I introduce the methods used to identify and examine the reviewed scholarship. After describing two framings of institutional habitus in these studies, I discuss contributions and absences in this scholarship. Given the absences, I advocate for theoretical and empirical development of the concept guided by a proposed definition of institutional habitus that reflects the intent and purposes of Bourdieu's framework. This argument is influenced by [Emirbayer and Johnson \(2008\)](#) who offer recommendations for the fruitful application of Bourdieu's framework given the "misappropriation of [Bourdieu's] ideas and . . . the lack of appreciation of their

potential usefulness” in organizational studies (p. 2). I conclude by reiterating the value of institutional habitus as a theoretical concept despite challenges in current conceptualizations. The potential for expanded insight from use of this definition, with its sharper recognition of the complexities of institutional behavior, can support the development of collective and structural responses that enhance student experiences and outcomes and advance equity in higher education.

## Bourdieu’s Social and Cultural Reproduction Framework

[Bourdieu \(1985\)](#) sought to uncover the central role of culture in groups’ collective efforts to (re)produce or challenge the social hierarchy in which they are positioned. His theory is grounded in several key concepts—field, capital, and habitus—that integrate culture, power, and structure in an analysis of the production of social action or practice. Field is the context in which advantage-oriented strategy<sup>1</sup> takes place. It embodies the social hierarchy that informs capital valuations and the use of symbolic power, the ability to simultaneously reinforce the legitimacy of social meanings that advantage dominant groups and facilitate marginalized groups’ acceptance of their subordinated positions ([Bourdieu, 1986, 1990b](#); [Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992](#)). Power relations among agents<sup>2</sup> and institutions structure a field’s social space according to the distribution of valued resources (or capitals) across social beings whose relative positions are determined by their possession of these resources. Social power is embodied in a variety of resources that become capital when they function as the basis of efforts to maintain or enhance positions in a field ([Bourdieu, 1989/1996](#)). Capital is self-fulfilling as it establishes the potential for accumulation and exchange based on the valued social, cultural, economic, and symbolic resources already possessed ([Bourdieu, 1986](#); [Swartz, 1997](#)).

Habitus, which is acquired through implicit and explicit socialization early in life, undergirds the rationale for thought and action within specific fields. Habitus has three critical aspects: (1) internalization of a cultural scheme that advantages dominant groups; (2) a system of dispositions that reflects orientations appropriate to this scheme; and (3) a system of practices, including perception and action, that tend to reproduce the patterns of this scheme ([Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990](#)). This durable set of transposable and unconscious dispositions and behaviors structures perception, establishes commonsense practices, and thus, influences how agents engage with their environments ([Bourdieu, 1977a, 1990a](#)). In particular, habitus as “history turned into nature” clarifies the ways in which past experiences shape contemporary practices in ways that normalize and reinforce current arrangements ([Bourdieu, 1977a](#), p. 78).

I focus on habitus in this article for several reasons. Habitus emphasizes the significance of interaction between students (as cultured individuals) and educational institutions (as cultured organizations; [McDermott, 1987](#); [Reay, David, & Ball, 2001](#)). According to [Bourdieu \(1977a\)](#), the true meaning of interpersonal interactions are not fully apprehended when they are taken as discrete events rather than as manifestations of social power relations ([Bourdieu, 1977a](#)). Finally, habitus is frequently employed in education research but remains undertheorized ([Grodsky & Jackson, 2009](#); [Reay, 2004](#)).

The analytic task is to reveal the education system’s contribution to the reproduction that preserves power relations between dominant and marginalized groups ([Bourdieu, 1977a](#)). By attending to how the meanings, practices, and effects of social hierarchies are reified in everyday practices, [Bourdieu’s \(1977a\)](#) theory of practice helps analysts to make visible and challenge the perpetuation of intergenerational inequities that educational institutions facilitate ([Bourdieu, 1986, 1993b](#); [Swartz, 1997](#)). Therefore, the theorist’s social and cultural reproduction framework provides useful tools with which to analyze sources of the constrained opportunity confronted by students from marginalized social groups. Response to the changing composition of student bodies and the concomitant change in student demands in higher education require different pedagogies, curricula, and orientations, which weaken the hold of tradition in higher education and create the potential for new social and power relations ([Bourdieu, 1984/1988](#)).

## Bourdieu and Higher Education

The application of Bourdieu's scholarship to higher education is apt for several reasons. Higher education and its contribution to the social structure were of central concern to Bourdieu. Three of his major works—*Homo Academicus* (1988), *Academic Discourse* (Bourdieu, Passeron, & de Saint Martin, 1994), *The State Nobility* (1996)—demystified the micro-level processes and practices within higher education that reflect the field of power and facilitate reproduction. For Bourdieu, a hierarchically organized higher education system, rather than the actions of individual institutions, helped to legitimize social inequity (Davies & Rizk, 2018). Given Bourdieu's scholarship as "arguably the most sustained theorisation of higher education" (Marginson, 2008, p. 303), scholars in a range of national contexts have used his framework to examine, most often, classed practices in higher education (e.g., Oliver & Kettley, 2010; Wakeling, 2005). In fact, one scholar argued that "[s]tudies that have explored issues of equity in higher education have overwhelmingly drawn on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts and ideas" (Donnelly, 2018, p. 3). Nevertheless, there is work to be done considering that higher educational scholarship from a sociological perspective "remains underdeveloped and marginal . . . is 'notable for its theoretical parsimony'" (Maton, 2005, p. 688). Treating higher education and the institutions that comprise it as a field of study contributes significantly to the theoretical development of research and perspectives on higher education.

Finally, institutional habitus in higher education contexts is the product of an exclusionary historical context which has an inevitable impact on marginalized students (Horvat & Antonio, 1999). Despite changing student populations, there has been an "absence of significant challenges to the dominant hegemony" in higher education (Watson, Nind, Humphris, & Borthwick, 2009, p. 666). The struggles of racially and socioeconomically marginalized students are linked to persistent, alienating beliefs and practices that reflect the prevalence of a White middle class orientation within higher education (Archer, 2003; Watson et al., 2009). Bourdieu argued that working class students who struggled in French higher education did so, not for lack of intellectual capacity, but because institutions did not valorize their home socialization (Bourdieu, 1989/1996; Robbins, 1993; Thomas, 2002). Yosso (2005) introduced "community cultural wealth" to capture the overlapping "accumulated assets and resources in the histories and lives of Communities of Color" (Acevedo-Gil, 2014, p. 77). Although not readily recognized within Bourdieu's framework, these resources function as nondominant capital even in contexts that favor dominant capital (Carter, 2003; Yosso, 2005). For example, through resistance capital and familial capital, respectively, students challenge inequities in their environments and draw on a cultural consciousness to maintain ties with and connections to larger cultural communities.

This context of higher education is rarely the subject of direct empirical observation because it requires deep investigation of the values, history, and practices of institutional culture (Hurtado, Griffin, Arellano, & Cuellar, 2008) and analysis of lived racial ideologies, which researchers tend to eschew (Harper, 2012; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009). Institutional habitus as "a set of historical relations 'deposited'" in institutions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 16) offers one avenue through which to examine "legacies of inclusion and exclusion" in higher education (Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar, & Arellano, 2012, p. 43). As a "product of history, whilst being simultaneously produced by the present," institutional habitus reflects higher education's historical legacy and recognizes ways in which this legacy continues its impact (Ingram, 2009, p. 432). Fruitful use of institutional habitus within education research would investigate how institutional practice reproduces educational inequities and is rooted in the power relations that conjure each institution's social position.

## Method

This critical review of empirical educational scholarship included studies situated within higher education as well as studies based in secondary contexts but focused on students' college preparation, choice, and transition (Usher & Pajares, 2008). It was guided by two primary considerations: (1) how scholars conceptualized

institutional habitus and (2) the extent to which these studies leveraged Bourdieu’s framework. The analysis focused on scholarship collected through searches of four social science and education research databases—Educational Resources Information Center, Academic Search, JSTOR, and ProQuest Research Library. Although this analysis focused primarily on peer-reviewed publications, I included conference proceedings and dissertations to include the range of empirical explorations of institutional habitus. Studies were identified through unique search phrases that paired “institutional habitus” or “organizational habitus” with “college” or “higher education.” See [Table 1](#) for an overview of these searches, which returned a total of 709 references: 638 peer-reviewed journal articles, 22 books and book chapters, 18 book reviews, 17 dissertations, 2 non–peer-reviewed articles, 1 conference proceeding, and 11 other items (e.g., bibliographies). After discarding duplicates, there remained a combined database of 297 unique publications.

**Table 1** Preliminary search results

Search phrase	Count
“Institutional habitus & college”	231
“Institutional habitus & higher education”	276
“Organizational habitus & college”	112
“Organizational habitus & higher education”	90
Subtotal	709
Duplicates	(297)
Screened	81
Yield	42
Bibliographic branching	1
Reviewer recommendation	1
Total reviewed	44

This database was further culled based on depth of empirical engagement to include only studies in which institutional habitus was explicitly employed in quantitative, qualitative, or mixed method inquiries related to higher education access, opportunity, experiences, and success ([Lareau & Weininger, 2003](#)). This excluded synthetic and theoretical analyses and those outside education. At minimum, I required more than passing mention of institutional habitus. For example, [Tett \(2004\)](#) was excluded because its only mention of institutional habitus came late in the article and included no citation or definition: “[E]lite institutions . . . are likely to regard such requirements as ‘extravagant’ and ‘illegitimate’ because they disturb the institutional habitus and field that assumes that its students will not need this kind of support” (p. 262).

## Analytic Procedures

Preliminary screening yielded 81 references, which were further assessed to clarify the definition, operationalization, and theorization of institutional habitus therein. Findings were arrived at through two rounds of a two-cycle analytic process ([Saldaña, 2009](#)). In each round, the studies were coded with preliminary codes and then subjected to focused coding and thematic analysis based on emergent patterns ([Bensimon, Harris, & Rueda, 2007](#); [Charmaz, 2014](#)). In the first round, I began with descriptive codes for educational and national context, theory and method, terminology, and concept definition and its source. Subsequent elements of interest were added as the review proceeded. I developed a codebook to track the analytically relevant

elements of each study ([Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & Joseph, 2005](#)). During the second round, I revisited all previously coded data and applied analytic codes that reflected my aim to scrutinize the use of institutional habitus, resulting in the contributions and critiques discussed below (see [Supplemental Table S1](#) in the online version of the journal).

From this analysis emerged a final set of 44 studies of which I conducted full-text reviews. Of this 44, 42 were selected from the pool of 81 references. One was identified through bibliographic branching ([Hoffman et al., 2015](#); [Rogers et al., 2005](#)), and another recommended by an anonymous reviewer. All 44 met the following criteria: English-language empirical research related to higher education with in-text reference to institutional habitus. The resultant database was composed of 36 articles, 2 books, 4 dissertations, 1 conference paper, 1 chapter that were published between 1997 and 2017 and situated in 11 national contexts, primarily England (16) or the United States (15). The studies were almost equally situated at the higher (21) or secondary (20) educational level (see [Table 2](#)). One non-higher education study was included because it was an early conceptualization of the concept (i.e., [Reay, 1998b](#)). The majority solely employed qualitative (26) or quantitative (7) methods, 8 combined methods, and 3 were described as mixed methods. Nearly half (20) engaged both students and school personnel, and 17 and 4 focused on each, respectively. Of those with school personnel, 9 included teachers, 9 included administrators (primarily principals), and 11 included other staff (e.g., tutors). The majority (29) reported samples differentiated by at least one demographic dimension (i.e., race, gender or socioeconomic status). (See [Supplemental Table S2](#) in the online version of the journal for an overview of these articles.) [Tables 2](#) and [S2](#) do not include theoretical pieces that informed this review.

**Table 2** Overview of empirical elements reported in reviewed studies

Characteristic	N (%) <sup>a</sup>
Empirical focus	
Students	19 (43)
School personnel	3 (7)
Educational contexts (e.g., schools or colleges)	23 (52)
Via students	13 (30)
Via school personnel	5 (11)
Via students and school personnel	3 (7)
Only	2 (5)
Educational level	
Higher education	21 (48)
Secondary	20 (45)
Elementary	2 (5)
Primary	1 (2)
National context(s)	
England	16 (36)
United States	15 (34)

Ireland	5 (11)
Australia	2 (5)
Hong Kong	1 (2)
South Africa	1 (2)
New Zealand	1 (2)
Croatia	1 (2)
Estonia	1 (2)
Germany	1 (2)
Methodology	
Qualitative	26 (59)
Quantitative	7 (16)
Dual approach <sup>b</sup>	8 (18)
Mixed methods	3 (7)
Sample	
Students only	17 (39)
School personnel only	4 (9)
Students and school personnel	20 (45)
Significant others	9 (20)
Parents	8 (18)
Parents only	1 (2)
Friends	2 (5)
Community members	1 (2)
Educational contexts <sup>c</sup>	12 (27)
Educational contexts only <sup>c</sup>	1 (2)
School districts	1 (2)
Sample demographics <sup>d</sup>	
Race/ethnicity	20 (45)
Race/ethnicity only	3 (7)
Socioeconomic status (SES)	19 (43)
SES only	3 (7)
Gender	15 (34)
Gender only	3 (7)
Multiple dimensions (e.g., race, gender, and/or SES)	19 (43)



Any social dimension (i.e., race, gender, or SES)	29 (66)
School type (e.g., student intake, curricular focus, level)	11 (25)
Other (e.g., educational level, age, Bourdieu <sup>e</sup> )	7 (16)
Intentional <sup>f</sup>	12 (27)
No detail provided	8 (18)

Note. N = 44. <sup>a</sup>N for each subgroup may total more than 44 due to overlap among categories. Percentages rounded to nearest hundredth. <sup>b</sup>Study employed both qualitative and quantitative methodologies but was not explicitly identified as “mixed methods.” <sup>c</sup>In addition to samples composed of school personnel and/or students, these studies also intentionally sampled the educational contexts (e.g., schools or colleges) in which the students and/or school personnel were situated. <sup>d</sup>Based on demographic detail provided for each study sample. <sup>e</sup>Study explicitly employed Bourdieu’s framework in criteria sample construction. <sup>f</sup>At least one dimension of the sample demographics was empirically meaningful (i.e., linked to research question and/or focus of the inquiry).

## Conceptualizing Institutional Habitus

Below I present findings from critical analysis of 44 publications that engage institutional habitus in empirical analyses related to higher education. Since its introduction to education research in 1997 by Patricia McDonough, who studied the influence of classed high school contexts on students’ college-going choices, attention to institutional habitus has been steady, averaging two publications each year. Most these studies (29) presented the concept as “institutional habitus” rather than “organizational habitus” though more than a third (13) employed the latter phrasing. In discussing the concept, most of the studies included discussion of Bourdieu’s key ideas (24) with 17 offering only brief mention of the theorist. These works’ scholarly lineage is limited to a handful of scholars ([Trivedi, 2007](#)). For example, [McDonough \(1991, 1997; McDonough & Antonio, 1996\)](#) was most cited (25) in definitions of institutional habitus, followed by Reay et al. ([1998a, 1998b; Reay, David, et al., 2001; Reay, David, & Ball, 2005](#)) who were cited 22 times. The next most common was cited only seven times ([Horvat & Antonio, 1999](#)). In addition to these general trends, this analysis revealed five key findings. I first address the first two—(1) two conceptual originators who introduced institutional habitus to education research and (2) two primary framings of institutional habitus—and enumerate the (3) contributions of this scholarship. Despite these contributions, however, this scholarship (4) contains critical oversights, which I discuss below, concluding with the (5) limited theoretical and empirical development of institutional habitus as a concept.

### Conceptual Originators

The scholarship reviewed here typically cited four studies that brought institutional habitus to education research. [McDonough \(1997\)](#) offered *organizational habitus*,<sup>3</sup> which she defined as the “impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual’s behavior, through an intermediate organization” (p. 107).<sup>4</sup> McDonough critiqued [Bourdieu’s \(1979/1984\)](#) development of habitus, which, she argued, failed to account for the “link between individual agency and social structures, especially schools” (p. 107). For McDonough, organizational habitus specified this link. Building on [McDonough \(1997\)](#), [Reay \(1998a, 1998b\)](#) engaged *institutional habitus*, describing it as a “complex mix of curriculum offer, teaching practices and what children bring with them to the classroom” ([1998b](#), p. 67). [Reay, David, et al. \(2001\)](#) later addressed the influence of historical context on institutional habitus, including change over time.

## Primary Framings of Institutional Habitus

This scholarship typically employed one of two understandings of institutional habitus:

1. *Institutional attribute*: An institution's interconnected, common sense beliefs, practices, or characteristics (e.g., status, curriculum, pedagogy, assumptions, expectations, and student characteristics) that are influenced by socioeconomic structures and that socialize students and other institutional actors (identified in 20 of the 44 analyzed studies); or
2. *Institutional effect*: The influence of social class on individual beliefs and behaviors as mediated through an institution and enacted through institutional structures, policies, practices, and beliefs (identified in 21 of the 44 analyzed studies).<sup>5</sup>

Although there was some overlap in authors' conceptualizations of institutional habitus, I determined framings based on a study's analytic focus. See [Supplemental Table S2](#) for the definitional framing used in each study. Below, I offer explanations of institutional habitus as *attribute* or *effect*.

### Institutional Attribute

In these 20 studies (i.e., [Ahmed, Kloot, & Collier-Reed, 2015](#); [Barber, 2002](#); [Bathmaker & Thomas, 2009](#); [Bergerson, 2007](#); [Chamberlin, 2010](#); [Cipollone & Stich, 2017](#); [Cornbleth, 2010](#); [Forbes, 2008](#); [Glaesser & Cooper, 2014](#); [Grodsky & Riegle-Crumb, 2010](#); [Jabal, 2013](#); [Mathers & Parry, 2009](#); [Morrison, 2009](#); [Núñez & Bowers, 2011](#); [Palardy, 2015](#); [Reay, 1998a, 1998b](#); [Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010](#); [Sheridan, 2011](#); [Wassmer, Moore, & Shulock, 2004](#)), institutional habitus is a characteristic that reflects the influence of “the structuring processes of social class” on an institution ([Barber, 2002](#), p. 391). Embedded in discourses, practices, attributes, and rewards, institutional habitus communicates “messages about who we are . . . and how we do things here” that encourage behavior that adheres to “preestablished routines that represent the accepted patterns” ([Cornbleth, 2010](#), p. 281; see also [Berger, 2000](#); [Sheridan, 2011](#)). Institutionalized features of habitus include communication, rules, norms, pedagogy, curriculum, academic ideology, artifacts, and “unequal material conditions . . . together with different histories, traditions and perceptions of worth” ([Crozier, Reay, Clayton, Colliander, & Grinstead, 2008](#), p. 169; see also [Berger, 2000](#); [Cornbleth, 2010](#); [Sheridan, 2011](#)). For these scholars, institutional habitus—“a pervasive stream of beliefs, expectations, and practices that flow through a school”—reflects social power relations, and shapes how members understand schools and themselves ([Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004](#), p. 76; see also [Bathmaker & Thomas, 2009](#)).

### Institutional Effect

Institutional habitus, in these 21 studies (i.e., [Acevedo-Gil, 2014](#); [Akom, 2003](#); [Alcorn & Thrupp, 2012](#); [Avramidis & Skidmore, 2004](#); [Chonwerawong, 2006](#); [Coldron, Crawford, Jones, & Simkins, 2014](#); [Darmody, 2012](#); [David, Ball, Davies, & Reay, 2003](#); [Diamond et al., 2004](#); [Doolan, Lukic, & Bukovic, 2016](#); [Dundar, 2011](#); [Horvat & Antonio, 1999](#); [Ingram, 2009](#); [McDonough, 1997](#); [Oliver & Kettley, 2010](#); [Pearce, Down, & Moore, 2008](#); [Reay, David, et al., 2001](#); [Reay et al., 2005](#); [Smyth & Banks, 2012](#); [Smyth & Hannan, 2007](#); [Thomas, 2002](#)), is a “complex amalgam of agency and structure” that generates its effects through institutional features like educational status, curriculum and pedagogy, attitudes, practices, networks, and the expressive order ([Reay, David, et al., 2001](#), para. 1.3; see also [Forbes, 2008](#); [Smyth & Banks, 2012](#)). It “subconsciously inform[s] practice . . . [and helps educational institutions to] determine what values, language and knowledge are regarded as legitimate” ([Thomas, 2002](#), p. 431), while acting as a “semi-autonomous means by which class processes are played out” in schools, exposing students to differential assumptions, expectations and support based on their social backgrounds ([Reay et al., 2010](#), p. 111; see also [Smyth & Banks, 2012](#)).

Regardless of the framing used, these scholars position institutional habitus as the source of messages, assumptions, norms, and expectations that lead to “structurally preferential treatment” typically by race, gender, and/or social class, which influences student outcomes ([Berger, 2000](#); [Cornbleth, 2010](#); [Forbes, 2008](#); [Ingram, 2009](#); [Robbins, 1993](#), p. 153; [Sheridan, 2011](#); [Smyth & Banks, 2012](#)). The critical distinction between the two framings is whether institutional habitus is understood as the element(s) that generate the preferential treatment (“Institutional Attribute”) or whether the treatment’s outcome is institutional habitus itself (“Institutional Effect”). That is, institutional habitus as attribute captures a mechanism of influence—for example, institutional norms and practices—whereas institutional habitus as effect reflects the influence of these norms and practices.

## Contributions of Conceptualizations of Institutional Habitus

The reviewed scholarship introduced and elevated a concept with which to examine the influence of social power in educational contexts. Below I discuss five contributions of this scholarship: (1) emphasis on the implications of educational contexts, (2) recognition of schools’ existence within a status hierarchy, (3) attention to interactions that generate differential experience, (4) exploration of differences within and across schools, and (5) elaboration of an ill-defined yet viable concept that has been adopted by scholars around the world.

### Implications of Educational Contexts

First, use of institutional habitus here uncovers educational institutions’ role in students’ educational outcomes (e.g., [Akom, 2003](#); [Cipollone & Stich, 2017](#); [Cornbleth, 2010](#); [Darmody, 2012](#); [Dundar, 2011](#); [Grodsky & Riegle-Crumb, 2010](#); [Jabal, 2013](#); [Leathwood & O’Connell, 2003](#); [McDonough, 1997](#); [Núñez & Bowers, 2011](#); [Oliver & Kettley, 2010](#); [Reay, 1998a](#); [Reay et al., 2010](#); [Reay, David, et al., 2001](#); [Reay et al., 2005](#); [Smyth & Hannan, 2007](#); [Thomas, 2002](#); [Wassmer et al., 2004](#)). To [McDonough’s \(1997\)](#) question, “At what points and for what types of students can the organization influence individual decision making?” (p. 13), the scholarship reviewed responds that schools, through their institutional habitus, shape students’ perceptions, decision making, experiences, and outcomes. These studies highlight schools’ significance to and responsibility for students’ experiences and outcomes, especially differential outcomes by student group (e.g., [Cipollone & Stich, 2017](#); [David et al., 2003](#); [Forbes, 2008](#); [Horvat & Antonio, 1999](#); [Leathwood & O’Connell, 2003](#); [Reay, 1998a](#); [Reay, David, et al., 2001](#); [Reay et al., 2005](#); [Smyth & Banks, 2012](#)). Some acknowledge that marginalized students’ segregation into schools by race or class, for example, systematically exposes them to environments low in capital that constrain their educational opportunity (e.g., [Cipollone & Stich, 2017](#); [Diamond et al., 2004](#); [Palardy, 2015](#)). Several studies recognize institutional complicity as a necessary precursor to equity-focused change (e.g., [Acevedo-Gil, 2014](#); [Avramidis & Skidmore, 2004](#); [Darmody, 2012](#); [Diamond et al., 2004](#); [Palardy, 2015](#); [Thomas, 2002](#)). As [Thomas \(2002\)](#) wrote in a study of student retention in one university in England, “[t]he responsibility for change is . . . laid squarely at the feet of the . . . institutions in particular . . . because unless the institutional habitus is changed [students] will continue to be discriminated against” (p. 440).

These scholars focus on schools as social actors (e.g., [Doolan et al., 2016](#); [Horvat & Antonio, 1999](#); [Ingram, 2009](#); [McDonough, 1997](#); [Reay, 1998a](#); [Wassmer et al., 2004](#)) whose self-interested strategies fuel their social reproductive tendencies (e.g., [Akom, 2003](#); [Bathmaker & Thomas, 2009](#); [Darmody, 2012](#); [Ingram, 2009](#); [Pearce et al., 2008](#)). [Bathmaker and Thomas \(2009\)](#), in a study of educational transitions in one “dual sector” (i.e., vocational and academic) campus in England, noted that, in response to intensifying competition, colleges, and universities must “work increasingly hard at constructing a place for themselves within the field” (p. 122). These positioning strategies include and exclude particular students, providing a “mechanism for ensuring that class order or position is maintained” ([Pearce et al., 2008](#), p. 261). Others have similarly argued for this contribution of use of Bourdieu’s work: It de-normalizes inequity and guides scholars to study the web of relations among social power, practice, and social reproduction ([Davies & Rizk, 2018](#); [Sablan & Tierney, 2014](#); [Winkle-Wagner, 2010a](#)).

## Institutional Status Hierarchies

Second, these scholars demonstrate that institutions embody social position by resituating them within the hierarchies that influence institutional practices and beliefs (e.g., [Acevedo-Gil, 2014](#); [Ahmed et al., 2015](#); [Bathmaker & Thomas, 2009](#); [Chamberlin, 2010](#); [Cipollone & Stich, 2017](#); [Coldron et al., 2014](#); [David et al., 2003](#); [Doolan et al., 2016](#); [Morrison, 2009](#); [Reay, David, et al., 2001](#); [Reay et al., 2010](#)). The two college preparatory high schools in which [Cipollone and Stich \(2017\)](#) studied capital transference, for instance, existed within a “highly stratified” system “evidenced by notable inequities in school-level factors and outcomes” (p. 338). Some of these scholars frame educational status—an institution’s place in the higher education hierarchy as measured by the institutions with which it is affiliated—as a constituent element of institutional habitus that links social structure to institutional practice (e.g., [Crozier et al., 2008](#); [Doolan et al., 2016](#); [Morrison, 2009](#); [Reay, David, et al., 2001](#); [Reay et al., 2005](#); [Reay et al., 2010](#)). Thus, not only are schools themselves hierarchically positioned but the meanings of their practices are deeply influenced by fields in which individuals are also positioned (e.g., [Bathmaker & Thomas, 2009](#); [Diamond et al., 2004](#); [McDonough, 1997](#); [Núñez & Bowers, 2011](#); [Reay, 1998a, 1998b](#); [Smyth & Hannan, 2007](#)). This social order influences beliefs and practice within schools “like a current that guides” ([Diamond et al., 2004](#), p. 76). Institutional habitus as a marker of this current is significant because “[i]t is in the differential relationships of power between parents, teachers, children, local government and the state . . . that a more complete picture is revealed” ([Reay, 1998b](#), p. 68). Schools that lack “dominant organizational habitus and other dominant capital” can disseminate some objectified capital but their nondominant status limits students’ ability to trade the capital for further access—a reality for which students’ own capitals cannot compensate ([Cipollone & Stich, 2017](#)). Conversely, a match between familial and institutional habitus allows affluent parents in affluent schools to take a more “hands-off” approach to aspiration realization because they are confident in schools’ ability to successfully shepherd students to the next step ([David et al., 2003](#), p. 29).

Schools’ social position also influences how students and other institutional actors understand the school, themselves, each other, and, therefore, how they behave (e.g., [Chamberlin, 2010](#); [Coldron et al., 2014](#); [Cornbleth, 2010](#); [David et al., 2003](#); [Diamond et al., 2004](#); [Horvat & Antonio, 1999](#); [Morrison, 2009](#); [Palardy, 2015](#); [Reay, 1998b](#); [Reay et al., 2010](#); [Wassmer et al., 2004](#)). [Coldron et al. \(2014\)](#) asserted that the relatively prestigious English primary and secondary schools in which they studied policy response were “objectively positioned within the school field and that positioning largely influenced the understandings, sayings and doings” in the schools (p. 400). They, for example, found in their study of school leaders that the principal of a stellar comprehensive secondary school was preoccupied with the school’s worth relative to local higher status selective schools rather than relative to other comprehensive schools, a preoccupation that guided his struggles for prestige in the local field.

## Interactional Processes

Third, this scholarship attends to interaction—specifically, the intra-institutional social processes through which reproduction occurs (e.g., [Ahmed et al., 2015](#); [Akom, 2003](#); [Cipollone & Stich, 2017](#); [Cornbleth, 2010](#); [Darmody, 2012](#); [Doolan et al., 2016](#); [Dundar, 2011](#); [Glaesser & Cooper, 2014](#); [Horvat & Antonio, 1999](#); [Ingram, 2009](#); [Jabal, 2013](#); [Mathers & Parry, 2009](#); [Oliver & Kettley, 2010](#); [Palardy, 2015](#); [Pearce et al., 2008](#); [Reay, 1998a, 1998b](#); [Reay et al., 2005](#); [Reay et al., 2010](#); [Sheridan, 2011](#); [Thomas, 2002](#)). [Reay \(1998b\)](#), in her study of mothers’ participation in their children’s education in two English primary schools, argued for attention to the “dynamic processes” through which educational experience is co-created, because “better representation of reality emerges out of a focus on the complexities of interaction” (p. 68), including the influence of institutional and individual histories (e.g., [Ingram, 2009](#); [Reay, David, et al., 2001](#)). By attending to interaction, scholars observe the “how” of student outcomes rather than just the “that” as well as the ways in which schools and actors are mutually constituted (e.g., [Bathmaker & Thomas, 2009](#); [Horvat & Antonio, 1999](#); [Ingram,](#)

2009; [McDonough, 1997](#); [Reay, 1998b](#); [Reay et al., 2010](#)). This makes visible the ways in which individual capital possession and institutional evaluation determine which students will acquire the capital schools make available ([Sablan & Tierney, 2014](#); [Winkle-Wagner, 2010a](#)). As a result, students' differential positioning relative to institutional habitus leads to congruence or dissonance, resulting in a form of symbolic violence through which "the school habitus asserts and maintains its dominance over the individuals who do not 'instinctually' fit" (e.g., [Horvat & Antonio, 1999](#), p. 320; [Reay, 1998a](#); [Reay, David, et al., 2001](#); [Reay et al., 2005](#)).

Critically, some of the reviewed studies emphasized the importance of individuals' negotiation of institutional habitus, arguing that existence of an institutional habitus is not enough to make it salient (e.g., [Cornbleth, 2010](#); [Ingram, 2009](#); [Palardy, 2015](#); [Reay, David, et al., 2001](#); [Sheridan, 2011](#); [Thomas, 2002](#)). Instead, institutional habitus is made significant in interactions with individual habitus through which teachers and students receive and respond to that habitus (e.g., [Bathmaker & Thomas, 2009](#); [Cipollone & Stich, 2017](#); [Cornbleth, 2010](#); [Morrison, 2009](#); [Reay, 1998a](#)). Attending to this negotiation recognizes the coexistence of structure and agency, which eschews structural determinism, allows the potential for change, aids the identification of processes that may challenge reproduction, and provides "a sense not only of the myriad adaptations, responses, reactions and resistances to 'the way the world is,' but also of individuals struggling to make the world a different place" (e.g., [McDonough, 1997](#); [Reay, 2004](#), p. 437; [Sablan & Tierney, 2014](#); [Winkle-Wagner, 2010b](#)).

#### Differentiation and Struggle

Fourth, these scholars explained differences in educational contexts that emerged through differentiation and struggle (e.g., [Alcorn & Thrupp, 2012](#); [Chamberlin, 2010](#); [Cipollone & Stich, 2017](#); [Ingram, 2009](#); [McDonough, 1997](#); [Reay, David, et al., 2001](#); [Smyth & Hannan, 2007](#); [Thomas, 2002](#)). [Cipollone and Stich \(2017\)](#), in a study in two nonselective public college preparatory high schools, employed institutional habitus to explain the differential ability of dominant and nondominant schools to transmit productive capital to their students. The two Irish secondary schools in which [Ingram \(2009\)](#) studied the habitus transformation of working-class boys also demonstrated different institutional habitus—the higher status school "conveys an academic disposition rooted in middle-class values, while the [lower status] school conveys a habitus that accommodates non-academic success rooted in traditional working-class values of education" (p. 432). Inattention to such internal conflict is a common critique of Bourdieu (see [Grodsky & Jackson, 2009](#)). Scholars here challenge constructions of institutional habitus that assume unity ([Cornbleth, 2010](#); [Smyth & Banks, 2012](#)). [Cornbleth \(2010\)](#), as example, in her study of an urban high school's effect on White, middle class prospective teachers' beliefs about students, documented competing institutional habitus—one hopeful about students' prospects; the other "discouraged and denigrating" (p. 288)—such that even within prevailing norms, notions of "how we do things here" were contested (p. 282).

Finally, these scholars countered a commonly held belief that all schools reflect a shared class consciousness (see [Lareau, 2000, 2003](#))—that is, the "existence of an undifferentiated educational provision in schools, regardless of their social class intake" (e.g., [Reay, 1998b](#), p. 163; see also [Doolan et al., 2016](#); [Ingram, 2009](#); [Palardy, 2015](#); [Reay et al., 2005](#)). [Doolan et al. \(2016\)](#), in a study of the ways in which three vocational secondary schools in Croatia embodied social class, identified working class institutional habitus that "reinforce[d] class belonging" by delimiting the opportunities available to working class students and by relegating the schools to inferior social positions (p. 355). Similarly, [Chamberlin \(2010\)](#), who studied the educational outcomes of high- and low-capital students in high- and low-capital architecture programs, and [Cipollone and Stich \(2017\)](#), who studied capital transformation among students in nonselective public schools, identified the simultaneous existence of both dominant and nondominant institutional habitus, which the authors connected to the various capitals possessed by the schools themselves as well as by their students.



## Empirical Groundwork

Finally, these scholars began the empirical groundwork needed to realize the potential of institutional habitus by introducing the concept and developing it through attempted operationalization (e.g., [McDonough, 1997](#); [Morrison, 2009](#); [Núñez & Bowers, 2011](#); [Palardy, 2015](#); [Reay, 1998b](#); [Reay et al., 2010](#); [Thomas, 2002](#)), integrating Bourdieu's other key concepts (e.g., [Ahmed et al., 2015](#); [Bergerson, 2007](#); [Cipollone & Stich, 2017](#); [Coldron et al., 2014](#); [Darmody, 2012](#)), and expanding beyond social class (e.g., [Akorn, 2003](#); [Diamond et al., 2004](#); [Horvat & Antonio, 1999](#); [Morrison, 2009](#)). These scholars argued that institutional habitus has advantages over institutional culture (e.g., [Avramidis & Skidmore, 2004](#); [Doolan et al., 2016](#); [Horvat & Antonio, 1999](#); [McDonough, 1997](#); [Reay et al., 2010](#); [Smyth & Hannan, 2007](#); [Thomas, 2002](#)), even as institutional habitus may be what is communicated through institutional culture (e.g., [Chamberlin, 2010](#); [Chonwerawong, 2006](#); [David et al., 2003](#); [Diamond et al., 2004](#)). Several studies extended Bourdieu's framework to address the interactive effects of race, gender, and/or class on institutional social reproduction (e.g., [Akorn, 2003](#); [Chonwerawong, 2006](#); [Diamond et al., 2004](#); [Horvat & Antonio, 1999](#); [Morrison, 2009](#); [Reay, 1998b](#); [Reay, David, et al., 2001](#); [Reay et al., 2005](#)). (For further consideration of Bourdieu beyond class, see [Reay, 2004](#).) For example, [Horvat and Antonio \(1999\)](#) who conducted a study of Black girls' experiences in an elite secondary school identified institutional habitus as the construct through which the girls "learn or relearn their status as different, lesser, and Other as African Americans in a [W]hite world" (p. 319).

Significantly, some of the reviewed scholarship reviewed here operationalized institutional habitus to uncover its constituent elements and processes (e.g., [Chamberlin, 2010](#); [Doolan et al., 2016](#); [Morrison, 2009](#); [Núñez & Bowers, 2011](#); [Reay, 1998b](#); [Reay, David, et al., 2001](#); [Reay et al., 2005](#); [Reay et al., 2010](#); [Smyth & Banks, 2012](#); [Smyth & Hannan, 2007](#); [Thomas, 2002](#)), including through large-scale quantitative data sets (e.g., [Grodsky & Riegle-Crumb, 2010](#); [Palardy, 2015](#)). [Morrison \(2009\)](#) in his study of a vocational program in an English college operationalized two aspects of institutional habitus: expressive order as teacher-student relations and educational status as institutional reputation and curricular offerings. [Núñez and Bowers's \(2011\)](#) quantitative study of college choice among high school students identified features of institutional habitus that influenced college enrollment: geographical context, college proximity, school resources related to college, and relationships. In these operationalizations, scholars connected institutional habitus to cultural capital (e.g., [Bathmaker & Thomas, 2009](#); [Bergerson, 2007](#); [Chamberlin, 2010](#); [Núñez & Bowers, 2011](#); [Reay et al., 2010](#); [Sheridan, 2011](#)). For example, [Sheridan \(2011\)](#), in a study of academic literacy development among international students in one Irish college, argued that "reading and writing, hence literacies, are cultural and social practices" or capital—not purely technical skills—to which schools structure students' access through institutional habitus (p. 130). A handful integrated Bourdieu's central concepts to uncover how habitus and access to capital, as made meaningful by field, shaped student and teacher behavior in schools (e.g., [Bergerson, 2007](#); [Coldron et al., 2014](#)). Empirical work has also spurred theoretical engagement (see [Atkinson, 2011](#)), which has resulted in defense-of-concept scholarship (see [Burke, Emmerich, & Ingram, 2013](#); [Dean, 2016](#)).

More than 20 years after its introduction to the field, institutional habitus continues to be engaged in scholarship that demonstrates its usefulness as a conceptual tool that explains educational inequities. Its use has drawn attention to institutional context, and specifically, to the ways in which schools vary in possession, recognition, and dissemination of social power with important implications for institutional actors. Perhaps most important, institutional habitus militates against normative and uncritical framings of educational failure that allow for a misrecognition that ties student experiences to their purported deficiencies. Nevertheless, there is work to be done to enrich empirical use of institutional habitus. Below, I outline ways in which these applications of institutional habitus leave room for theoretical elaboration.

## Critiques of Applications of Institutional Habitus

Below I discuss the following five aspects of this scholarship that under-use institutional habitus as a theoretical tool within higher education research: (1) discounting the role of institutional status; (2) attributing institutional habitus to students; (3) engaging institutional habitus in isolation; (4) effecting limited conceptual elaboration; and, in a subset of this scholarship; (5) ascribing the concept to an institutional functional area. Other scholars have conducted synthetic analyses of the use of Bourdieu's key concepts within education research (for relevant reviews, see [Davies & Rizk, 2018](#); [Reay, 2004](#); [Sablan & Tierney, 2014](#); [Winkle-Wagner, 2010b](#)), intersections with which will be noted below.

### Failure to Center Institutional Status

First, this scholarship afforded relatively little attention to institutional status as the source of institutional habitus (e.g., [Ahmed et al., 2015](#); [Akom, 2003](#); [Cipollone & Stich, 2017](#); [Darmody, 2012](#); [Dundar, 2011](#); [Glaesser & Cooper, 2014](#); [Grodsky & Riegle-Crumb, 2010](#); [Jabal, 2013](#); [McDonough, 1997](#); [Núñez & Bowers, 2011](#); [Palardy, 2015](#); [Reay, David, et al., 2001](#)). Institutional elements (e.g., practices, assumptions, experiences) are presented as dimensions across which institutions differ but not necessarily as characteristics that are inherently and functionally tied to the varied social positions schools occupy. For example, [McDonough's \(1997\)](#) definition of institutional habitus, from her study of college choice within high schools differentiated by students' social class, did not acknowledge that schools belong to status cultures that are different from yet conceptually compatible with the status groups to which individuals belong. [Núñez and Bowers \(2011\)](#), in a study of college choice among high school students, delineated elements that comprise institutional habitus but none were presumed to reflect institutional status. This absence runs counter to [Bourdieu's \(1989/1996\)](#) framework, which noted the dual classification of students and schools. Although [Bourdieu \(1977a\)](#) provided that social position shapes habitus, [Reay \(1998b\)](#), for example, in her study of English mothers' involvement in their children's elementary education, suggested that institutional habitus emerged from differences across schools rather than that institutional habitus generated differences across schools. This oversight is possible, in part, because of limited focus on field's role in structuring institutional practice. Most of this scholarship made no reference to field (e.g., [Chamberlin, 2010](#); [McDonough, 1997](#)), or if field was mentioned, it applied to students' social position rather than to schools' (e.g., [Bathmaker & Thomas, 2009](#); [Reay, 1998a](#); [Reay, David, et al., 2001](#)). Others introduced field but without connection to differences across educational contexts (e.g., [Cipollone & Stich, 2017](#); [Crozier et al., 2008](#); [Ingram, 2009](#); [Thomas, 2002](#)). Generally, field is primarily made visible through the collective class consciousness that an educational institution is said to reflect rather than through the activities of the institution itself (e.g., [Pearce et al., 2008](#); [Reay, 1998b](#)). This form of individual habitus brings field (i.e., the larger context of power relations) into the institution but in such a way that it ignores the reality that an institution's own field position is a significant way—if not the primary way—through which structural power relations enter the school.

For some of these scholars, educational status was part of institutional habitus but it was conceived of as a form of social capital that reflects the status of the institutions with which a school is associated rather than the status of a school itself (e.g., [Morrison, 2009](#); [Reay, David, et al., 2001](#); [Reay et al., 2005](#)). Furthermore, educational status was presented as one of the dimensions across which schools differed but as a determinant (e.g., [Reay, 1998b](#); [Reay, David, et al., 2001](#)). Authors asserted that institutional habitus influenced students' college choices, including understandings of the appropriate next step; however, no link was made to the power relations inherent in that influence. Still, schools' social positions are likely correlated with the social positions of the schools with which they are associated, which is part of what makes one school a given next step for another. This scholarship acknowledged that different statuses exist among schools but not that these statuses define institutional habitus.

## Attribution to Individuals Rather Than Institutions

Second, there was within this scholarship a presumed necessary association between institutional habitus and the social class of a school's students (e.g., [Acevedo-Gil, 2014](#); [Alcorn & Thrupp, 2012](#); [Diamond et al., 2004](#); [Doolan et al., 2016](#); [Ingram, 2009](#); [McDonough, 1997](#); [Morrison, 2009](#); [Reay, 1998b](#); [Reay et al., 2005](#); [Reay et al., 2010](#); [Smyth & Banks, 2012](#); [Smyth & Hannan, 2007](#)) or other institutional actors (e.g., [Chonwerawong, 2006](#); [Coldron et al., 2014](#))—that is, of individual habitus imagined collectively. In a study of the influence of school context on teachers' and principals' beliefs about teaching and learning in secondary schools in New Zealand that varied by social class intake, [Alcorn and Thrupp \(2012\)](#) explicitly drew on scholarship that granted that "socio-economic status of school intakes has a considerable influence on school processes and culture" (p. 108). [Chonwerawong's \(2006\)](#) study of a public university's influence on the early academic experiences of low-income first-generation college students from racially marginalized backgrounds linked her version of institutional habitus to the "collective habitus created by staff, faculty, and students" (p. 438). Even further removed from the school itself was the contention that institutional habitus was a feature of individuals rather than of institutions (e.g., [Coldron et al., 2014](#); [Cornbleth, 2010](#); [Crozier et al., 2008](#)). For [Coldron et al. \(2014\)](#), who studied policy response among principals from "well-positioned" schools in three districts in England, institutional habitus was influenced by schools but worn by individuals. They wrote, "[I]nstitutional habitus is acquired analogously as a participant in a field of schools. The kind of habitus developed is appropriate and necessary for continued membership of, or advancement in, a stakeholder group within a field" (p. 389). [Cornbleth \(2010\)](#), who studied the diversity beliefs of teachers in one high school, similarly acknowledged institutional agents' "dispositional configurations," which resulted from socialization experiences within an institutional context (p. 287).

By attending to individuals' characteristics, this scholarship demonstrated differences by students' class status but not necessarily that these differences were related to institutional habitus. For example, [Doolan et al. \(2016\)](#) identified working class institutional habitus in the Croatian vocational high schools they studied: "practical subjects are prioritised over the academic, as is on-the-job training over school work. In addition, a practice of 'dumbing down' the curriculum was identified, as teachers seek to respond to what they see as [students'] learning capacities" (p. 355). [McDonough \(1997\)](#) similarly identified institutional habitus as the source of college choice processes among the working and middle class students she studied. Rather than proving this, however, she merely demonstrated that there were social class differences within and across schools—outcomes predicted by the aspirational and behavioral schema of individual habitus and opportunity gaps by social group, both of which are well documented in education research (e.g., [Carter & Welner, 2013](#); [Johnson-Ahorlu, 2012](#); [Rubin et al., 2014](#)).

## Habitus in Isolation

Third, these works were plagued by a common absence in application of Bourdieu's framework: the lack of interrelated analysis of capital, field, and habitus ([Callahan & Chumney, 2009](#); [Swartz, 2008](#)). Critics have argued that the "constructs of capital and field must be considered in conjunction with habitus as shaping practice because they reflect the state of the chances objectively offered to an individual" ([Callahan & Chumney, 2009](#), p. 1623). Bourdieu's concepts are meaningless without each other ([Winkle-Wagner, 2010a](#)); thus, when the concepts are applied in isolation, social practice is underdetermined ([Cipollone & Stich, 2017](#); [Sablan & Tierney, 2014](#)), meaning that capital is left to languish as resources with only potential energy without actors inclined to pursue and use them in particular ways given those actors' positions within structured social spaces or fields. Similarly, habitus without capital and field is merely unstructured disposition with no reason for action.

The scholarship reviewed here typically considered institutional habitus in isolation or introduced a second concept (i.e., capital or field) without attention to the third central concept (e.g., [Acevedo-Gil, 2014](#); [Ahmed et al., 2015](#); [Akom, 2003](#); [Bathmaker & Thomas, 2009](#); [Chamberlin, 2010](#); [Crozier et al., 2008](#); [Darmody,](#)



2012; Dunder, 2011; Glaesser & Cooper, 2014; Jabal, 2013; Palardy, 2015; Reay, David, et al., 2001; Reay et al., 2005). Crozier et al. (2008), for example, who studied the college experiences of middle and working class students in four colleges in England, referred to universities, academic disciplines, and social contexts as fields structured by scarce capitals but the concepts were not engaged to deepen the authors' application of institutional habitus. They acknowledged, that given capital's scarcity, "[t]he 'players' or students in our study thus need strategies and resources and dispositions to 'play'" without addressing the same requirements of play for institutions (p. 168). As noted above, partial theorizations often do not attend to field, resulting in isolated use of habitus. For instance, Chamberlin (2010), who studied student acclimation within high- and low-capital architecture programs, connected institutional habitus and capital, noting that the institutional habitus of the architecture programs were shaped by the schools' and students' capital. However, Chamberlin missed that the divergent institutional habitus she observed both reflected and gave shape to the wider field in which the programs existed.

Although as noted above, some scholars referenced all three concepts, and in some cases the concepts' collective influence on institutional practice, studies here tended to lack strong connections among the concepts (e.g., Bergerson, 2007; Cipollone & Stich, 2017; Coldron et al., 2014). For example, Coldron et al. (2014), in a study of principals' policy responses in three English districts, "class schools as actors in that they too possess capitals" (p. 389) and acknowledged field as what determined schools' status and influenced individual behavior. Nevertheless, because institutional habitus belonged to individuals rather than schools, there was no mechanism offered through which to interrogate schools' differential capital stocks and social positions to understand institutional practice. Similarly, Cipollone and Stich (2017), in a study of high school students' capital acquisition, noted the existence of schools with dominant and nondominant habitus, but even as these schools were noted to be positioned within a stratified field, their field position and stocks of capital were not put into relationship with institutional habitus. In other words, they simultaneously existed but were not mutually implicated.

#### Limited Conceptual Elaboration

Fourth, this scholarship did little to further theorize or operationalize institutional habitus—an "as yet immature concept" despite being employed within education research since the late 1990s (Burke et al., 2013, p. 167). Charges of "vague conceptualization or a lack of empirical verification" in adaptations of Bourdieu's framework are echoed elsewhere (see Davies & Rizk, 2018, p. 20; see also Dunder, 2011; Reay, 2004; Winkle-Wagner, 2010a). Conceptual meanings are often assumed rather than operationalized, leaving a gap between the theory's requirements and a study's data and analytic procedures (Reay, 2004; Sablan & Tierney, 2014; Winkle-Wagner, 2010a). As is argued here about institutional habitus, Davies and Rizk (2018), in a review of uses of cultural capital, noted that similar missteps have contributed to an evolution of the concept "that has not been a linear one in which its conceptual clarity has been enhanced or its explanatory power improved" (p. 19). The nonlinear progression of institutional habitus began with McDonough's (1997) framing, which was not particularly well specified, and—despite the author's intention to differentiate the concept—it was ultimately difficult to distinguish institutional habitus from institutional culture in McDonough's work except for the purported link between institutional habitus and students' social class. McDonough (1997) claimed that institutional habitus captured "how social class operates through high schools to shape students' perceptions of appropriate college choices, thereby affecting patterns of educational attainment" (p. 107), but what McDonough studied could be achieved with individual habitus—that is, a shared class habitus that individuals internalize—rather with a theoretical advancement that specifies how educational institutions internalize sense-making schemata related to social status (Bourdieu, 1977b). McDonough's (1997) treatment instead discussed the effects of reassembling a subset of a class fraction with a shared habitus within a particular school; she did not address the educational institution as another type of hierarchically positioned social actor. Without this

latter concern, institutional habitus is not leveraged for its full potential; institutional habitus, then, merely reframes individual habitus.

Subsequent use of institutional habitus has done little to advance understanding and application of the concept. First, much of the scholarship engaged here offers no clear definition of institutional habitus (e.g., [Ahmed et al., 2015](#); [Bergerson, 2007](#); [Crozier et al., 2008](#); [Darmody, 2012](#); [Dundar, 2011](#); [Glaesser & Cooper, 2014](#); [Horvat & Antonio, 1999](#); [Jabal, 2013](#); [Wakeling, 2005](#)), including in some cases not even relying on a definition offered in antecedent scholarship (e.g., [Bathmaker & Thomas, 2009](#); [Bergerson, 2007](#); [Crozier et al., 2008](#); [David et al., 2003](#); [Forbes, 2008](#); [Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003](#); [Mathers & Parry, 2009](#); [Núñez & Bowers, 2011](#); [Sheridan, 2011](#)). Second, many of those who cited an earlier source engaged in no additional definitional work (e.g., [Akom, 2003](#); [Alcorn & Thrupp, 2012](#); [Avramidis & Skidmore, 2004](#); [Barber, 2002](#); [Chonwerawong, 2006](#); [Cipollone & Stich, 2017](#); [Darmody, 2012](#); [Diamond et al., 2004](#); [Dundar, 2011](#); [Glaesser & Cooper, 2014](#); [Horvat & Antonio, 1999](#); [Jabal, 2013](#); [Morrison, 2009](#); [Pearce et al., 2008](#); [Reay, 1998a, 1998b](#); [Reay, David, et al., 2001](#); [Reay et al., 2010](#); [Smyth & Banks, 2012](#); [Wakeling, 2005](#); [Wassmer et al., 2004](#)). Most authors typically quoted [McDonough \(1997\)](#) or [Reay \(1998a; Reay, David, et al., 2001\)](#) to define institutional habitus, before applying it—without further explication—to their current empirical context. For example, [Pearce et al.'s \(2008\)](#) study of Australian working class college student identity cited a definition from [Reay, David, et al. \(2001\)](#), which itself paraphrased [McDonough \(1997\)](#). [Reay \(2004\)](#) identified a similar pattern in applications of habitus, suggesting it was “assumed or appropriated rather than ‘put into practice’” (p. 440). Such an approach reflects a belief in the usefulness of institutional habitus “as is,” and relatively little curiosity about what is required to realize the concept’s potential. As a result, authors did not critically evaluate how antecedent scholarship applied Bourdieu’s theory or what was required to operationalize institutional habitus.

Furthermore, many of these applications lacked conceptual precision—with institutional habitus and institutional culture or climate used interchangeably (e.g., [Acevedo-Gil, 2014](#); [Alcorn & Thrupp, 2012](#); [Bathmaker & Thomas, 2009](#); [Grodsky & Riegle-Crumb, 2010](#); [Núñez & Bowers, 2011](#); [Palardy, 2015](#); [Sheridan, 2011](#)) or no identified source for institutional habitus (e.g., [Acevedo-Gil, 2014](#); [Ahmed et al., 2015](#); [Akom, 2003](#); [Bathmaker & Thomas, 2009](#); [Bergerson, 2007](#); [Cipollone & Stich, 2017](#); [Coldron et al., 2014](#); [Cornbleth, 2010](#); [Darmody, 2012](#); [Dundar, 2011](#); [Glaesser & Cooper, 2014](#); [Ingram, 2009](#); [Jabal, 2013](#); [Mathers & Parry, 2009](#); [Núñez & Bowers, 2011](#); [Oliver & Kettley, 2010](#); [Reay, 1998a; Reay et al., 2010](#); [Thomas, 2002](#); [Wassmer et al., 2004](#)). For example, [Sheridan’s \(2011\)](#) study of acclimation among international students in an Irish college treated institutional habitus as undifferentiated from institutional “norms, practices, and rewards”—a common framing of institutional culture ([Alvesson, 2013](#))—without tracing these to the broader social structure (p. 130). [Barber \(2002\)](#), in a study of teacher caring in an urban secondary school in Australia, attached institutional habitus’ productiveness to its embedded narratives about “what ‘the kids at this school’ are like” (p. 393) but with no identified origin, it is unclear what these embedded narratives are based on or why particular narratives became embedded in particular schools.

#### Institutional Habitus of a Functional Area

Finally, although most scholars attended to the organizational level, there was some tendency—building on [McDonough \(1997\)](#)—to assign institutional habitus to a subarea of a school (e.g., [Acevedo-Gil, 2014](#); [Palardy, 2015](#)). [McDonough’s \(1997\)](#) “college choice organizational habitus” (CCOH) was meant to capture a school’s broader orientation, as shaped by student social class, toward the college choice process, which “limits the universe of possible college choices into a smaller range of manageable considerations” (p. 10). Similarly, [Acevedo-Gil \(2014\)](#) and [Palardy \(2015, p. 332\)](#) who studied, respectively, the college cultures of one urban high school and high schools that varied by students’ social class background, articulated this orientation as the “collective sensibilities, preferences, and values of the school regarding postsecondary education.” This emphasis on the habitus of an institutional subarea was problematic for two reasons. First, it disconnected the

subarea from the broader institution as if the area were a free-standing entity, and, second, given that CCOH was meant to capture the pervasive collective class consciousness inculcated by a school, it is unclear why one subarea would be uniquely affected. [Acevedo-Gil \(2014\)](#) did not connect institutional habitus at the organizational level and the CCOH she studied; this suggested that each subarea within a school could or does have an institutional habitus that is somehow independent of the institutional habitus of the school itself.

If it is accepted that institutional habitus reflects the collective class consciousness that a school embodies, then all subareas should be inflected by this consciousness. As such, there would be no unique CCOH but instead the way in which the school's institutional habitus influences the arrangement of organizational practices and student decision making related to college choice. More pressingly, however, if it is argued—as it is here—that institutional habitus represents the organizational embodiment of institutional social position, then a subarea of an educational institution would necessarily be shaped by the relative position of that area within the institution and within the broader field of education or social power. By assigning institutional habitus to a discrete subarea (i.e., a school's college choice apparatus) rather than identifying it as an orientation represented throughout a school, even if it is contested, these scholars made it possible to misidentify observed interactions and outcomes as the result of the orientations and proclivities of individuals that occupy specific roles (e.g., guidance counselors) rather than as outcomes that are generated, in part, by the institution itself.

### Limited Theoretical and Empirical Development

I have discussed critiques and contributions of the reviewed scholarship, close analysis of which revealed critical oversights. A generous reading of these findings is that this scholarship lays the groundwork for more robust application of institutional habitus; a more pointed interpretation suggests limited preoccupation with theoretical development of the concept as an empirical tool within education research. Although attention to the concept has spanned more than 20 years, the concept's application remains in a relative infancy due, in part, to limited attention to conceptual elaboration. In terms of scholarly evolution, few studies (6) offered original interpretations of institutional habitus (e.g., [Akorn, 2003](#); [Cornbleth, 2010](#); [Horvat & Antonio, 1999](#); [Ingram, 2009](#); [McDonough, 1997](#); [Wassmer et al., 2004](#)). For example, [Akorn \(2003\)](#) expanded on McDonough's definition: "a set of dispositions, perceptions, and appreciations transmitted to individuals through a common organizational culture" (p. 306), which specified both the types of individual behavior influenced and a mechanism of influence. More than half (25) included explanatory material, some of which resituated institutional habitus in its original theoretical context. This included [Reay \(1998a\)](#) who clarified institutional habitus by linking it to individual habitus, describing habitus as "a dynamic concept, a rich interlacing of past and present, individual and collective" to explain the capacity, albeit limited due to its collectivity, for institutional habitus to change (p. 521). [Ingram \(2009\)](#) addressed another fundamental characteristic of habitus—its structuring force ([Bourdieu, 1977b](#))—to indicate that although individual habitus is capable of shaping educational environments, it is unlikely to because "as [institutional] dispositions . . . are borne from the collective habitus they tend to reinforce rather than contend with social norms, allowing for these norms to reproduce" (p. 424). Institutional habitus, like individual habitus, is capable of but unlikely to change, contributing to both its disruptive potential and its reproductive tendency.

The scholarly lineage noted above may indicate a desire for fidelity to original conceptualizations given that at least half of the publications cited scholars who brought the concept to education research: [McDonough \(1997\)](#) (25) and Reay and colleagues (Reay, [1998a, 1998b](#); [Reay, David, & Ball, 2001](#); [Reay, David, & Ball, 2005](#)) (22). Alongside this fidelity existed a tendency to lean heavily on early scholarship such that among the works that provided a definition of institutional habitus (26), 20 included a definition that was quoted or closely paraphrased from another source. This trend began early. [Reay's \(1998a\)](#) definition of institutional habitus—"the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organization" (p. 521)—closely tracked [McDonough's \(1997\)](#): "The impact of a cultural group or social class on

an individual's behavior through an intermediate organization" (p. 107). Subsequent scholarship similarly defined institutional habitus. For example, [Cipollone and Stich \(2017\)](#) also cited McDonough's definition directly.

Finally, 18 of the reviewed studies included no direct definition of institutional habitus. For example, one attested to the concept's usefulness absent a clear assertion of its meaning: "It [institutional habitus] reveals how each school's habitus projects, 'normalizes' and engenders particular knowledge and experiences . . . and why the dominant social groups therein determine (and control) interactions" ([Jabal, 2013](#), p. 7). Others attempted to unpack the concept without defining it. [Oliver and Kettley \(2010\)](#) wrote that scholarly use of institutional habitus highlighted a school effect that tended to emphasize the import of school rather than of teachers. As a remedy, they addressed teachers' "unconscious and pre-reflexive agency," which, they argued, helps to structure institutional habitus (p. 739). Even with additional contextualization, scholars more frequently articulated what institutional habitus does than what it is. Thus, as a set, the reviewed scholarship represents conceptual elaboration through fits and starts rather than concerted efforts to realize, interrogate, and expand on the empirical usefulness of institutional habitus as grounded in Bourdieu's theoretical framework.

Within this scholarship, there are a series of missed opportunities to advance theoretical and empirical understandings of institutional habitus in ways that acknowledge the conceptual underpinnings of Bourdieu's original notion of habitus, the central role of educational institutions and their social positions, and the theorist's insistence on dialectical engagement between theory and practice. Although this analysis, by definition, emphasizes the scholarship reviewed here, my central argument, ultimately, is that exploitation of the empirical potential of institutional habitus requires sharp attention to its implications from a theoretical perspective. Explorations of institutional habitus that do not address institutional struggles over social power do a theoretical disservice to Bourdieu's framework by identifying a shared set of institutional beliefs and practices absent analysis of *why* these beliefs and practices are shared in *this* place and inculcated in *these* students. Simply noting commonalities does not address Bourdieu's conceptual understanding of schools' role in social reproduction. In the following section, guided by Bourdieu's scholarship and the current analysis, I propose a definition of institutional habitus that may better guide empirical investigation of and theorization about institutional practice.

## Reconceptualizing Institutional Habitus

The notion that educational institutions have institutional habitus that are situated in broader social, cultural, and educational fields and that influence "how [students] see themselves and are seen by others" has informed investigations of higher education in a range of national settings ([Reay et al., 2010](#), p. 111). Findings from analysis of this literature indicated that the cultural and social biases that influence institutional habitus differentially sort, privilege and reward students based on students' respect for, possession of, and adherence to institutionally legitimized knowledge, language, values, and behaviors ([Pearce et al., 2008](#); [Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001](#); [Thomas, 2002](#)), resulting in "structurally preferential treatment" for students from relatively privileged social backgrounds ([Robbins, 1993](#), p. 153).

My review and critique of this scholarship revealed that researchers frame institutional habitus as either the effect of institutionalized privilege or a discrete institutional attribute that privileges. Although these conceptualizations implicate educational institutions and the wider education system in social and cultural reproduction, they nevertheless may mistake the *result* of social sorting for institutional habitus, however conceived. That is, evidence drawn from the congregation in a specific school of individuals with similar ways of being likely reflects the socialized preferences and decision making of individuals from varied social strata rather than a unique feature or impact of the school itself. Examining individual habitus, even if taken collectively, as it interacts with the environment of a particular educational institution is empirical exploration of the operation of

individual habitus. It does not sufficiently engage institutional-level habitus as a concept and social reality of its own.

Informed by Bourdieu's scholarship, I propose a definition of institutional habitus that may better capture the motivations behind institutional practice and better explain the differential effects of interactions between institutions and students of varying social status. I define institutional habitus as an institution's values, common sense, beliefs, behaviors, and taken-for-granted positions *as situated within* historical and contemporary social relations. This definition centers the web of power relations that differentially affect students and institutions based on their own social locations ([byrd, 2013, 2015](#)). That is, institutional status—as determined by the educational institution's position within a hierarchy of relevant social fields—structures institutionally and socially situated perspective(s) that give rise to the normalized practices, attributes, beliefs, and assumptions of an institution. For example, one such attribute—the habitual draw of a student body with a given set of characteristics—is one of the ways in which institutional habitus exerts its influence. It is not that a school behaves as it does because it has a specific set of students but that a school has a specific set of students because it behaves as it does even as these are mutually shaping; inevitably the presence of a particular student body influences institutional practice. Institutional habitus shapes institutional policy and practice in much the same way that individual habitus influences individual social action through interpretive schema governed by the objective and subjective effects of social position. Furthermore, attending to the collective nature of institutional habitus, similar behaviors and beliefs might be observed among similarly situated institutions given that these behaviors and beliefs emerge from relatively equivalent stocks of capital and shared constraints informed by the institutions' (shared) social position within one or more fields that structure institutional habitus.

Institutional characteristics that coincide with institutional habitus (e.g., pedagogy, curriculum, organizational systems, or expressive and cultural characteristics) are not institutional habitus but the products of institutional habitus. Similarly, the results—or effects—of these characteristics are not institutional habitus but are instead a reflection of institutional habitus that captures the institution's contribution to reproduction. Through its interaction with individual habitus, institutional habitus differentially affects student outcomes, particularly for students from marginalized backgrounds. Therefore, effects cannot be attributed to institutions alone but must be traced through the interactions that help institutions leave their mark on students and vice versa. This parallels Bourdieu's description and theorization of the workings of individual habitus as simultaneously action and reaction ([Bourdieu, 1990a](#)):

Analysis of the relationship between the objectified schemes and the schemes incorporated . . . presupposes a structural analysis of the social organization of the internal space . . . and the relation of this internal space to external space, an analysis which . . . is the only means of fully grasping structuring structures which, remaining obscure to themselves, are revealed only in the objects they structure. ([Bourdieu, 1977a](#), p. 90)

Schools are objects structured by the structuring structures to which Bourdieu refers. The social space both within and external to schools is structured by related webs of power relations. These give rise to influential, organizing schema that shape institutional beliefs and practice, which, in turn, shape students' educational experiences. The conceptualization of institutional habitus offered here facilitates structural analysis of both institutional behavior and institutional impact. Next, I introduce principles for applying this definition empirically.

## Putting Institutional Habitus Into Practice

Beyond inspiring institutional habitus as a theoretical concept, Bourdieu's framework, which links micro-action and macro-forces, offers a methodology through which to situate institutional practice within its larger sociopolitical context, and to reveal the ways in which external pressures are absorbed, repulsed, or



transformed based, in part, on an institution's structural position ([Naidoo, 2004](#)). As a theory of practice, [Bourdieu's \(1977b\)](#) framework supports investigation of how and why institutions take up particular actions and to what effect—a way of investigating the processes and norms that influence their social action. [Bourdieu and Wacquant \(1992\)](#) called for social praxeology, in which empirical research and analysis are designed “to uncover the most profoundly buried structures of the various social worlds which constitute the social universe, as well as the ‘mechanisms’ which tend to ensure their reproduction or their transformation” ([Bourdieu, 1989/1996](#), p. 1). Research inspired by such a praxeology would incorporate the five essential elements detailed below, several of which were addressed cogently by [Emirbayer and Johnson \(2008\)](#) related to organizational studies: empiricism, interpenetration of theory and practice, relationalism, historical contextualization, and conceptual development. I conclude by introducing a hypothetical example that makes these abstract elements more concrete.

Drawing on the offered definition of institutional habitus and empirical requirements of Bourdieu's theory, research aimed at robust engagement with institutional habitus must rely on *empiricism* or practical examination of the social world as modeled by the studies reviewed here. Bourdieu's concepts must serve as *thinking tools* ([Wacquant, 1989](#), p. 50, emphasis in original) infused from conceptualization to analysis and that reflect Bourdieu's core orientation toward social reality: that differentially situated social actors subconsciously attempt to preserve and acquire capital through practices influenced by the understandings and knowledge normalized to their social position as members in fields. Second, whereas the studies reviewed here often removed institutional habitus from its theoretical context or failed to carry the concept through all elements of a study, research should *enable theory and empirical discovery to “interpenetrate each other entirely”* such that they constantly (re)shape each other to enrich empirical and theoretical discovery ([Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992](#), p. 35, emphasis in original; see also [Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008](#); [Kloot, 2011](#)). [Winkle-Wagner \(2010a\)](#) also argued for “back-and-forth movement between data analysis and reflection on theory” (p. 88), which allows data interrogation to make Bourdieu's abstract concepts visible and conclusions to be driven by the relationships among theory, analysis, and interpretation ([Reay, 2004](#); [Sablan & Tierney, 2014](#)).

Third, and relatedly, research inspired by Bourdieu's scholarship must be *relational*—that is, actors and actions cannot be interpreted in isolation but must be considered as contextually constituted. Bourdieu eschewed “a substantialist manner” that assumes that social reality is composed of interactions among things rather than of the relations among these things and interactions ([Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992](#), p. 28). The studies reviewed here tended to ignore the social position of educational institutions as relevant to institutional habitus and, ultimately, institutional behavior. Through relational analysis, however, institutional practice is shown to be structurally influenced by the presence, action, and values of other socially relevant institutions and the broader field. To understand this influence, one must analyze social positions, relationships among those in varied social positions, and the ways in which capital shapes positions and relationships in a particular field ([Swartz, 1997](#)). In organizational research, this is realized through a relational sociology of organizations *in fields*, the web of relations in which organizations are situated, and/or organizations *as fields*, which considers organizations as webs of power relations that structure the behavior of institutional actors ([Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008](#)). By definition, relational analyses are multilevel, and focus on relations that exist within organizations, among organizations, and between organizations and the larger social fields in which they exist (see also [Bartlett & Vavrus, 2014](#); [Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008](#)).

Within this relational configuration, analysis is oriented toward both structural positions and the practices of those who are structurally positioned. According to Bourdieu, social phenomenon must always be linked to the field of power because everyday practices and experiences are made meaningful by the power relations in which they are manifest ([Bourdieu, 1984/1988](#); [Swartz, 1997](#); [Winkle-Wagner, 2010a](#)). Within Bourdieu's framework, social position—marked by relative amounts of valued capital—fundamentally shapes what is

practicable and what is believed to be possible, and thus, social practice in a field ([Bourdieu, 1977b](#)). Unlike the reviewed scholarship in which the social position of educational institutions, if addressed, was divorced from interpretations of institutional practice, the relational analyst must investigate differentially situated social beings (e.g., individuals, groups, and institutions) and the “symbolically meaningful” strategies through which they attempt to garner capital within particular fields ([Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008](#), p. 14). Through structurally aware relational analysis, it is possible to observe practice and influences on practice and how these may vary across schools of different social status.

Furthermore, scholars must *provide historical contextualization* because habitus, as a form of embodied history, generates action “in accordance with the schemes engendered by history” ([Bourdieu, 1977a](#), p. 82). Although some of the reviewed scholarship linked educational institutions to their wider social context by addressing broader policy shifts or local educational inequities, for example, almost none named institutional history as relevant to the salience of contemporary institutional action. Practice cannot be fully comprehended without its historical and contextual precedents. For example, theoretical elaboration related to higher education should attend to its racialized history and exclusions ([Patton, 2016](#)). Given this history, in which predominantly White institutions were intended as racially “exclusive club[s]” ([Hurtado et al., 2012](#), p. 59; see also [Patton, 2016](#)), some empirical work with institutional habitus should address not only the impact of the “collective habitus” of the “myth of [W]hite racial supremacy” that forms higher education’s sociopolitical context but also the ways in which institutional habitus, capital, and field interact to normalize Whiteness to detrimental effect for students marginalized by race and other social markers ([Chandler, 2007](#), pp. 127, 126; see also [Gusa, 2010](#); [Yosso et al., 2009](#)).

Finally, at this stage in the concept’s development, scholars should engage in explicit *conceptual development of institutional habitus* by crafting ways in which to make institutional habitus visible and examining not only what it is but how it has its effects—as noted, this element received isolated attention in the reviewed scholarship. The same has been prescribed for productive use of Bourdieu’s other concepts ([Davies & Rizk, 2018](#); [Sablan & Tierney, 2014](#); [Winkle-Wagner, 2010a](#)). Relying on close empirical investigation of the sources, constituent elements, interactions, and effects of institutional habitus, researchers can, based on these empirical principles, examine the generalized realities of habitus within institutions of a certain status and the unique realities generated by the trajectory of the specific institution(s) being studied ([Bourdieu, 1984/1988](#); [Bourdieu et al., 1999](#)).

#### A Hypothetical Study

I now sketch a hypothetical study that employs institutional habitus in empirical scholarship. It is impossible to fully outline a study because the inquiry, its bounds, and implications for institutional habitus would necessarily emerge as the study unfolded. Thus, my intent is to be illustrative rather than prescriptive, acknowledging that there are multiple ways to engage institutional habitus in empirical education research. For now, consider a study of policy implementation within higher education. This study engages the outlined principles as an empirical investigation that is guided from start to finish by Bourdieu’s framework, leveraging the policy to examine a campus’s socially situated behavior and the study itself to identify and interrogate the operation of institutional habitus. Given that habitus is a decision-making schema—that is, an interpretive and behavioral framework animated by the decision maker’s social status—a policy study that examines institutional habitus should attend to local sense-making processes (i.e., policy interpretation) and link these to internal or external factors, the influence of which reflects institutional social position (i.e., policy strategy). The roots of these schema should be contextualized within institutions’ contemporary and historical power relations and social contexts, revealing the existence of self-interested, status-concerned institutional action, and how this action is shaped over time by related behavior and interests.

### Conceptualization

Guided by the principle of interpenetration, Bourdieu's framework would serve as a guiding principle from study conceptualization through analysis. It would inform criteria for campus selection, guiding the researcher to articulate factors of status differentiation among local campuses—that is, what functions as capital in the local arena and how do these resources create demarcations among campuses? Beyond objective measures (e.g., budget), this would include reputational (i.e., the campus relative to other local campuses) and network-related (i.e., the campus's peer institutions) criteria. The researcher would look to Bourdieu's framework for guidance on design and implementation of the study, which would have an inherently critical orientation, representing as it does the belief that observable practices contain both the content of those practices and the hierarchically organized meanings and relationships in which those practices are embedded. The study could draw on critical policy and/or critical race studies, for example, to examine ways in which the policy reinforces and/or challenges current distributions of power and how this is similar to or different from previous institutional and social patterns, signifying the principle of historical contextualization.

### Participant selection

In pursuit of the relationalism principle, at minimum, the study would focus on one implementing campus, the educational system to which the campus belongs, and other influential entities (e.g., organizations or actors) that shape policy interpretation and implementation. This would allow the researcher to investigate the external forces to which the campus responds and that configure power relations on campus (i.e., campus in fields) and the internal forces that fashion policy response based on organizational interests and the differential influence wielded by institutional agents (i.e., campus as field). Participants, too, would be purposefully sampled to include actors most (likely) influenced by or, importantly, influential to the policy. In addition to students, other actors within the institution (e.g., teachers, administrators, and other staff) strongly direct the ways in which institutional habitus is lived through their interaction with and (re)negotiation of it. The quest would be to continually situate the campus, internal actors, and its policy activities within fields of power—What action is taking place? Motivated by what? To whose benefit?—to establish these activities as lived expressions of the pursuit of capital, the exchange and accumulation of which challenges or reinforces relations among dominant and marginalized actors. Again, the principle of interpenetration of theory and discovery is visible here. Although a study of one campus can be relational if it accounts for the mutual impact of the campus and other players in relevant fields, a multi-institutional analysis would be theoretically richer if focused, for example, on policy implementation within campuses of similar or different social statuses. The researcher would frame institutional habitus as an institutional factor in campuses' policy responses by attending to the ways in which social position is revealed within institutional practice, including the weight of capital- and field-shaped interests on policy action.

### Data collection

A wealth of data—local documents, conversations, events, interviews, institutional changes, and/or policy relevant outcomes—could be analyzed through qualitative and/or quantitative approaches for this study ([Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008](#)). Although empirical study of institutional habitus can take many forms, it must isolate details about the institution. A study that largely engages student-level actors, for example, must make aspects of the campus visible beyond student reports and experiences. Institutional metrics, artifacts, and documents, including archival material, would address the principle of historical contextualization and—as articulations of agents acting within and on behalf of the campus—could be deconstructed through content and discourse analysis as instantiations of institutional history, beliefs, and norms all of which are linked to institutional habitus. Guided by both the principles of interpenetration and of relationalism, data collection would aim to uncover the ways in which the actions of the campus(es) and of institutional actors were facilitated or constrained by their relative social positions—and this orientation would be carried into analysis.



## Data analysis and interpretation

The principles of relationalism, interpenetration, and historical contextualization come together to bring the study's aims to fruition through guiding questions about the ways of thinking and behaving institutions and actors draw on to interpret and respond to the policy: What frames and patterns emerge? How do these relate to institutional position? What (mis)alignments exist across institutional actors? Finally, how do contemporary policy activities continue and/or disrupt historical activities and orientations? In addition, the researcher should operationalize Bourdieu's core concepts of habitus, capital, and field (see also [Davies & Rizk, 2018](#); [Swartz, 1997](#); [Winkle-Wagner, 2010a](#)), asking, for example,

- *Field*: What external and internal actors are relevant to policy activity? How is their influence enacted? How does their influence shape decision making? This would help uncover the dialectical interactions among internal and external stakeholders whose differential stocks of capital guide policy activity and help to make visible the campus's web of power relations. Furthermore, by identifying influential actors, a researcher can draw bounds around relevant fields, which cannot be assumed a priori but must be identified and constructed through interactions in the real world.
- *Institutional habitus*: How does sense of the institution's social position inform policy activity? This emphasizes the campus's own social status—how and when it becomes salient to policy decision making, in what terms, and to what effect—and articulates how the institution's self-identity comes into view and how institutional actors move to protect or change this identity and why. This last element links to interaction and negotiation as well as to individual habitus because policy actors are differentially situated within and react to institutional habitus, shaping both it and the policy outcomes.
- *Capital*: What is at stake in policy interactions? Which resources determine the relative positions of actors related to the policy? What resources do actors and institutions draw on to advocate for and advance their actions? In this way, the researcher identifies the policy's its impact on capital distribution, which is actually its impact on institutional power—with dominant actors and institutions more likely to gain or retain valued capital.

Given institutional habitus' relative theoretical infancy, the policy researcher should operationalize the concept, proposing and interrogating empirical formulations, to realize the principle of conceptual development. Again, the scholar could draw on qualitative or quantitative methodologies to operationalize (the influence of) field, institutional habitus and capital. For example, factor analysis could be employed within a large data set to isolate the constituent elements of institutional habitus. Or, if as [Reay \(1998b\)](#) suggested, the researcher agrees that expressive order is a constituent element of institutional habitus, then the policy study would identify how the norms through which the policy is communicated reflect institutional habitus, and in turn, draw institutional status and interests into everyday decision making and activity related to the policy. Furthermore, because institutional habitus is embodied in multiple aspects of the campus, the researcher can also uncover other campus elements in which institutional habitus is influential. It would be the researcher's task to articulate the theoretical reasoning that links particular elements to institutional habitus and to delineate how they have

impact—causally, correlationally, or situationally—for the policy based on the institutional context being studied. Relatedly, development of institutional habitus would require the policy researcher to engage others' ideas and conceptualizations. Rather than merely citing it, however, the researcher would directly interrogate and build on previous scholarship and formulations of institutional habitus, asking, "What will I carry forward? What should I address that they did not?" and most important, "Why?" as explained within Bourdieu's theory. This would silence the echo chamber in which institutional habitus has existed, and provide avenues for the concept's refinement.

In this section, I asserted a set of principles that should guide empirical application of institutional habitus in education research. The hypothetical policy study revealed how to develop a status-aware, relational study of institutional action among educational contexts differentiated by social position. Such application would advance use of institutional habitus as a conceptual tool with which to investigate the influential role of institutional social position within studies concerned with educational equity in higher education and beyond.

## Conclusion

Over more than 20 years, scholars have leveraged Bourdieu's scholarship and employed institutional habitus to emphasize the implications of educational contexts, the relevance of status to practice these institutions, the interactional processes that generate (differences in) educational experience, and differentiation and struggle within and across educational contexts. Despite these contributions, I have argued—based on a critical review of this scholarship—that these attempts to employ institutional habitus have left the concept undertheorized. Specifically, this scholarship is plagued by several key absences, including narrow attention to institutional status; failure to attribute institutional habitus to institutions; scant integration of Bourdieu's other key concepts; and limited theoretical or empirical development of the concept. Nevertheless, the project I advance is not critique of institutional habitus itself but interrogation of the concept's operationalization, and advocacy for its empirical development. I join [Reay, David, et al. \(2001\)](#) in arguing that problems in conceptualization of institutional habitus "do not vitiate its value but, rather, suggest the need for further work" (Abstract).

To aid this work, I proposed a robust definition of institutional habitus: an institution's values, common sense, beliefs, behaviors, and taken-for-granted positions *as situated within* historical and contemporary social relations. Although the concept may be difficult to define precisely ([Reay, 1998b](#)), I offer this definition as a heuristic through which to view the social world, and, most immediately, with which to interpret the meanings and effects of institutional behavior. In contrast to static notions of schools as disinterested institutions in which students merely experience success or failure, institutional habitus as outlined here offers scholars a more theoretically engaged method through which to challenge normative assumptions about social and academic integration, which serve social reproductive purposes, require students to remedy a condition that is collectively created, and de-emphasize the unique role of colleges and universities in structuring student success or failure ([Tett, 2004](#)). Inadequate attention to educational institutions as social actors shaped by their own structurally determined interests puts scholars at risk of unwittingly reinforcing the reproductive nature of educational interactions by failing to recognize the relationships between institutional practices and social structure ([Apple, 1980](#); [Bourdieu, 1977b](#)). The offered definition helps frame schools as socially situated and context-driven social actors rather than as ahistorical entities that lack their own values, interests, preferences, and inclinations toward action. It can draw attention to otherwise invisible encounters and conversions that negatively affect student outcomes and experiences. Figured as dynamic, interested social beings, educational institutions are not passive elements in a field that structures students' experiences but actors in fields of their own for whom status and legitimacy concerns are primary ([Reay, David, et al., 2001](#)).

A research agenda informed by this definition would be grounded in the assumption that educational experiences, particularly for marginalized populations, are not the sole result of individual attributes and

capacities. Responding to [Bourdieu's \(1993a\)](#) call to augment theory with the “specificity of an empirical reality” (p. 271), researchers can use the definition of institutional habitus offered here to unearth the apparatuses that “educational systems employ to reproduce existing social relations” ([Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002](#), p. 114; see also [Pearce et al., 2008](#); [Robbins, 1993](#)). Research in this vein would identify the ways in which educational practice and its outcomes emerge from the interplay of an evolving set of structurally, institutionally, and individually influenced dispositions and actions that are rooted in social power. It would also indicate that educational institutions themselves are not immune to this structuration ([Giddens, 1979](#)). This underscores the value of institutional habitus above and beyond institutional culture or climate, studies of which may separate culture from structure rather than acknowledging their interdependence (e.g., [Alvesson, 2013](#)) or address structure without attending specifically to interactive institutional and social power relations (e.g., [Hurtado, 1994](#)). Institutional habitus and its guiding framework resituate institutional beliefs and practices within larger social ideologies and power relations, revealing the structural roots of institutional practice and the need for grander transformations. Although institutional climate or culture may be employed to make such assessments, these are inherent to institutional habitus.

As [Tett \(2004\)](#) argued, if educational inequities “are to be properly addressed, and systematically dismantled, there is a need to understand issues of process and structure, and exclusion and choice, in all their complexity” (p. 252). Robust operationalization of institutional habitus can help scholars and practitioners identify and take responsibility for the institutional mechanisms that facilitate student success or failure ([Thomas, 2002](#)). Although schools’ institutional habitus tend to pathologize differences that set students apart from the institution, institutional habitus need not reproduce inequity. Additional scholarly attention can reveal the ways in which institutional habitus marginalizes but greater awareness of these processes of marginalization can also provide insight into opportunities to interrupt this marginalization, as [Sablan and Tierney \(2014\)](#) have also argued. Considering individual and institutional habitus as distinct but intermingled realities can reveal the mechanisms through which students become (mis)matched with educational contexts as well as the effect this may have ([Reay, David, et al., 2001](#)). In clarifying this problem, different, and perhaps more equitable, solutions may emerge.

## Notes

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1. Bourdieu’s use of “strategy” was not meant to conjure the intentional pursuit of material gain or interests. Instead, the interest that guides strategy is a “socially situated concern” that, rather than rational calculation or intention, reflects the influence of habitus ([Wacquant, 1992](#), p. 25), which establishes “a *tacit* calculation of interest and pursuit of distinction” in accord with one’s social position and that subconsciously establishes the reason for social action ([Swartz, 1997](#), p. 290, emphasis added).
2. [Bourdieu \(1989/1996\)](#) employed the term *agent* rather than *individual* to emphasize social beings’ preparedness to act given their orientation toward and understanding of the field of social power. Therefore, I employ the term *agent* rather than *individual* when discussing

Bourdieu's theoretical framework and scholarship. More broadly, however, I use *actor* in this way and reserve *agent* to refer to those who act on behalf of a school or college.

3. [McDonough \(1991\)](#) explored the possibility of a habitus held at the organizational level earlier, but the scholar first used the phrase "organizational habitus" in her 1997 book.
4. I default to [Reay's \(1998a\)](#) "institutional habitus" because it is more common in this literature.
5. There was not enough elaboration of the concept in three studies for me to assess the framing of institutional habitus employed (i.e., [Crozier et al., 2008](#); [Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003](#); [Wakeling, 2005](#)).

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