

Being Mindful of the *Habitus* of Culture

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Abstract: The dialectic between cultural determinism and individual agency lies at the heart of intercultural communication study. Indeed, we must understand, but not overestimate the patterned constraints of culture when interacting with “others” because all cultural actors are not alike. In order to better appreciate how individuals relate to the structure of culture, this essay will employ Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* to explore both the conscious and unconscious connections. Following this, the practice of mindfulness will be briefly examined as a possible means to increase individuals’ capacity for reflexive agency. [China Media Research. 2011; 7(3): 11-20]

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In a previous essay (Cargile, 2005), I encouraged intercultural communication scholars to view culture dialectically. Although dialectical metatheory has much to suggest regarding our appreciation of culture, one area where it proves most valuable is in understanding the relationship resulting between a culture and its members. In contrast to a structural-functional view of the relationship, one in which people follow some unspecified combination of universal-, cultural-, and individual-level scripts (e.g., Hofstede, 1980), a dialectical perspective suggests instead that people enact agency within a field of culturally prefigured patterns. Like a well-worn path through the woods, individuals often follow the markers, but may sometimes find it more suitable to blaze their own trail. This dialectic between cultural determinism and individual agency is at the heart of intercultural communication study. To study culture is know the structural constraints within which Others operate, but it is not to know how they will act in any given situation.

Consider, for example, the case of the woman who climbed up the house. As reported in the book *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds* (Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998), a local woman arrived at a house in Nepal to be interviewed by the authors. As one author went downstairs to greet her, the woman “somehow crawled up the vertical outside wall, made her way around the balcony to an opening in the railing, came through the opening, and sat down” (p. 10). The question, of course, becomes why did this woman climb up the wall when such entry was unprecedented in the community and when the woman had no reputation for unusual behavior? Clearly, no cultural- or individual-level script for this conduct existed. However, that is not to say that culture was irrelevant to her actions.

As Holland et al. (1998) explain, the woman was of lower caste and the house belonged to a higher-caste person. In this community, locals are socialized through discourses about food and its vulnerability to the pollution of lower-caste people. Consequently, the explanation of culture holds that the woman so

internalized these discourses that she avoided the first-floor kitchen entry by forcing herself up the wall and away from the sin of polluting another’s hearth. However, there is the additional matter of social positioning to consider. It is also likely that the logic of hearth pollution was not embodied in her, but instead imposed upon her by the other locals on the scene. Perhaps she simply did not want to face the imagined consequences of entering the kitchen.

The case of the woman who climbed up the house illustrates that the relationship between culture and action is clearly complex. So complex that no non-dialectical explanation is satisfactory. On the one hand, there are the constraints of culture to consider, but on the other, there is the agency of actors to accept. As Jessop explains it,

Structural constraints always operate selectively: they are not absolute and unconditional but are always temporally, spatially, agency- and strategy-specific. (Likewise) agents are reflexive, capable of reformulating within limits their own identities and interests, and able to engage in strategic calculation about their current situation (1996, p. 124).

Thus, in order to best acknowledge the validity behind both of these opposed approaches, a dialectical description of their relationship is required.

Viewed dialectically, the woman who climbed up the house was both constrained and agentic. Indeed, she had come up with a spectacular improvisation in the face of a problematic situation. In the usual circumstances of community life, she would not be allowed to enter the house, yet she needed to get to the second-floor balcony.

Improvisations are the sort of impromptu actions that occur when our past, brought to the present as habitus, meets with a particular combination of circumstances and conditions for which we have no

set response. Such improvisations are the openings by which change comes about from generation to generation (Holland, et al., 1998, p. 18).

Seen in this light, both the structure of culture and the agency of individuals manifest in the improvisations enacted when *habitus* meets the particular conditions of the present moment. *Habitus* is a concept introduced by Bourdieu (1977) and is critically situated at the nexus of structure and agency. If we hope to understand better the relationship born between a culture and its members, the notion of *habitus* is worth examining in some detail.

Habitus and Culture

Within the field of sociology, the relative influences of structure and agency on action have long been debated. More recently, dualistic frameworks have given way to dialectical ones that acknowledge the importance of both structure and agency in social interaction (e.g., Archer, 2003; Giddens, 1984). Despite an emerging metatheoretical consensus around a dialectical approach, Akram (2010) argues that the notion of agency remains underdeveloped in the current dialectical accounts. Consequently, she turns to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* to provide "a useful correction to the neglect of the unconscious" (p. 19) in understanding the workings of structure and agency.

To begin, Bourdieu sees social structure most clearly manifest in his notion of field. The field is "a relational configuration endowed with a specific gravity which it imposes on all the objects and agents which enter it" (Bourdieu, cited in Widick, 2003: 684). Smith (2001) argues that the concept of field is a metaphor for the domains of social life, thus in complex societies, social space is divided into multiple fields, such as corporate, artistic, educational, athletic, or gendered fields. Fields often overlap (e.g., gender and class) and typically span institutions (e.g., the field of government crosses branches and offices). They include prescriptive rules and norms, but above all else a field is a contextually-grounded, systematic manner of relating. For example, an artist, such as Woody Allen or Pulitzer Prize winner Marilynne Robinson, may have high standing in cinematic or literary fields, but may be treated as a failure in a commercial field. As Coles relates, "individuals are not necessarily beholden to objective structures but instead are able to negotiate and traverse fields and subfields" (2009, p. 36). Thus the concept of field emphasizes that people operate within and across different "system[s] of social positions... structured internally in terms of power relations" (Thorpe, 2009, p. 496).

Because fields are structured by power, Lynam et al. point out, (2007) "the concept of a field directs the analyst to focus attention on processes such as gaining entry and navigating the social terrain of relationships"

(p. 29). A field thus highlights the necessity of social and material capital as individual agents make their way in a given social space; "the possession of valued capital within a field determines the rank of individuals, groups, and organizations" (Coles, 2009, p. 36). This connection between field and capital can be seen in the case of an interviewee from Vietnam who reported being marginalized in the UK: "I think people don't give you credit... But if you, you know, are white and well dressed, right away they think, you know, she's educated" (Lynam, et al., 2007, p. 30). As a response to her treatment, the woman reported pursuing doctoral studies in London in an attempt to acquire more social capital and thereby gain access to additional corporate and class fields.

As this brief description illustrates, Bourdieu's notion of field is analogous to culture, particularly as defined within the cultural studies tradition (i.e., a way of life encompassing structures of power; Nelson, Treichler, & Grossberg, 1992). Though similar in most respects, the concept of field places special emphasis on capital, negotiation, and the game-like aspects of cultural participation. These features are highlighted in Coles' (2009) description of the field (i.e., culture) of masculinity.

Within the field of masculinity, there are sites of domination and subordination, orthodoxy (maintaining the status quo) and heterodoxy (seeking change), submission and usurpation, Individuals, groups, and organizations struggle to lay claim to the legitimacy of specific capital within the field of masculinity. Those in dominant positions strive to conserve the status quo by monopolizing definitions of masculinity and the value and distribution of capital, while subordinate challengers look to subversive strategies, thus generating flux and mechanisms for change. (p. 36)

Although nicely illustrative of field, this description remains incomplete for the present purpose of understanding the relationship born between a culture and its members because a field is not an abstract social structure; it operates via living beings. Thus Bourdieu's notion of field depends upon its counterpart notion of *habitus*- the "embodiment of our social location" within and across fields (Noble & Watkins, 2003, p. 522). As an individual enters a field, the gravity of that field imposes, "hailing the individual to respond to themselves and their surroundings in specific ways to the point of habituation" (Adams, 2006, p. 514). Such habituation is known as *habitus*.

Bourdieu proffers the concept of *habitus* as "his... solution to the structure and agency debate" (Akram, 2010, p. 44), and views it primarily as an embodied phenomenon. As Jenkins describes it, "the body is a

mnemonic device upon and in which the very basics of culture, the practical [taxonomies] of the *habitus*, are imprinted and encoded in a socializing or learning process which commences during early childhood” (cited in Adams, 2006: 514). Thus, *habitus* is a way of being an individual brings to the field, including “predisposed ways of thinking, acting and moving in and through the social environment that encompasses posture, demeanors, outlook, expectations, and tastes” (Sweetman, 2003, p. 532). Such predispositions are conditioned as an individual responds over the course of time to the structures imposed by the various fields in which he or she operates. The extent to which any two individuals operate within and across the same fields, they will develop similar *habitus*. It is rare, of course, that individuals encounter the exact same configuration of overlapping fields (e.g., race, gender, class, religion) across social settings. Consequently, each person’s *habitus* is unique- at least to some degree. This idiosyncrasy of *habitus*, combined with the flux of fields (i.e., the fields themselves are constantly changing), provides for an individual’s capacity for agency.

As many read him, Bourdieu champions the agentic capacities of *habitus* as a “system of durable, *transposable* dispositions” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72, original emphasis) that allow for “regulated improvisations” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 57). As Crossley puts it, “The agent is wholly active here in constructing an inductive picture of the world... There is no determinism in any meaningful sense of the word, just pragmatic adaptation and realism” (2001, p. 112). Despite this, the concept of *habitus* has been criticized as being overly deterministic, as though it were locked in a closed loop of mutual reproduction in which field begets *habitus* and *habitus* begets field. Such critics claim that once a field has conditioned an individual, the individual has no choice but to enact the behaviors that originally constituted the field, thereby reproducing the same system of social positioning (e.g., Sewell Jr, 1992; Widick, 2003). Other critics acknowledge that change can be introduced between the conditioning of *habitus* and the reproduction of fields, but suggest that this change must be largely unintentional and unreflexive. In Jenkins words, “it is difficult to know where to place conscious deliberation and awareness in Bourdieu’s scheme of things” (1992, p. 77).

Indeed, the role of reflexivity within *habitus* is difficult to determine. As Akram points out, “Bourdieu’s conception of agency or practice is to be contrasted with [those]...conceptions of agency... dependant on agents who engage in intentional and reflexive actions, without any reference to more subtle modes of behavior and interaction in the structured world” (2010, p. 105). As a result, the key question for Bourdieu is not whether the concept of *habitus* allows

for agency (it does), but rather what is the nature of agency within *habitus*? If we can more fully appreciate the multiple forms of agency that operate within the *habitus* of Bourdieu’s making, we will better understand the influence of structure and, more particularly, how individuals relate to the structure of those cultural fields that have conditioned them.

As already discussed, *habitus* is “a useful correction to the neglect of the unconscious” (Akram, 2010, p. 19) because it emphasizes pre-reflexive reactions. *Habitus* lurks largely in the territory of the unconscious because embodied predispositions are automatic and thus do not typically engender conscious, reflexive consideration. Consider, for example, the implicit attitude many U.S. Americans hold about African-American males. Having been conditioned by fields of negative stereotypes and structural racism, many Americans often respond to the presence of African-American males with some sort of defensive posturing. This posturing is manifest in many forms including the misidentification of harmless objects as weapons (Payne, Lambert, & Jacoby, 2002), the ease of associating negatively valenced words (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998), blink amplification (Amodio, Harmon-Jones, & Devine, 2003), and amygdala activation (Cunningham, et al., 2004). Such defensive reactions are culturally conditioned as part of one’s *habitus* and typically manifest without awareness. An individual will certainly not be consciously aware of neural activity deep within their brain (i.e., amygdala activation) and may not notice the tensing of their own muscles, yet the reaction nevertheless exists.

As an embodied phenomenon, the notion of *habitus* emphasizes such pre-reflexive conditioning but also allows for intentional and reflexive reactions as well. For his part, Bourdieu claims that the reflexivity of *habitus* emerges during periods of crisis in which the field and one’s *habitus* are misaligned.

One cannot rule out that it (habitus) may be superseded in certain circumstances- certainly in situations of crisis which adjust the immediate adjustment of habitus to field- by other principles, such as rational and conscious computation (Bourdieu, cited in Akram, 2010: 122).

In other words, an individual may reflexively intervene on an otherwise pre-reflexive response when there is recognition that the response does not fit the encountered field.

Applying this insight to the previous example, it is likely that one’s defensive posturing vis-à-vis African-American males may escape notice when aligned with a given field (e.g., within avowed or aversively racist communities). However, when the social setting is a U.S. college campus and the field educational, such a

defensive reaction is judged as out of place, or even immoral. As predicted, students often get reflexive about their own *habitus* in this context. As one student once wrote,

I notice that sometimes when I'm walking down the street and there is a Black man coming in my direction I feel a little uneasy and then feel a sense of relief after our paths have crossed and I come out on the other side unharmed (emphasis added).

Reflexivity can thus characterize one's *habitus* and this awareness may be used to facilitate intentional reactions- in this case, not responding defensively. However, as this example suggests, reflexivity of *habitus* does not always (or even usually) result in the desired response. Just because I want to be open and loving when a stranger crosses my path does not mean that I will be.

The issue of achieving some desired outcome points directly back to the concept of agency. At heart, human agency refers to people effecting change in themselves and their situations (Bandura, 1989). As already mentioned, some social theorists use reflexivity (i.e., self-conscious scrutiny) as a defining feature of agency; an individual is aware of what they want to do and they do it. However, this kind of autonomous agency neglects a myriad of sources beyond conscious intention that can also inform behavior. Instead, a more comprehensive view of agency is one that Bandura (1989) has termed "emergent interactive agency". In his words, "persons are neither autonomous agents nor simply mechanical conveyers of animating environmental influences," rather action develops within a system of "reciprocal causation" among "interacting determinants" (p. 1175). In a like manner, Elder-Vass characterizes action as emerging from both our "mental entities" and the "hardware" of our brains (2007, p. 336). Agency is thus most realistically viewed as the product of both reflexive (e.g., conscious thoughts) and pre-reflexive conditions (e.g., implicit habits). Fortunately, the notion of *habitus* is ideally suited to illustrate just how this sort of change emerges in such a complex manner.

Returning again to the example of defensive posturing vis-à-vis African-American males, such reactions are culturally conditioned as part of one's *habitus* and typically manifest without awareness. However, when this pre-reflexive response meets a field it does not fit, reflexivity is introduced and an individual may intentionally attempt to modify his or her behavior. This may or may not be successful depending on how deeply conditioned the *habitus* is. As recent neuroscience research makes clear, conditioning creates correspondent neural networks in the brain. This discovery is expressed in the new adage: neurons that

fire together wire together. "Neuroplasticity is the most important general discovery in all of neuroscience in the last decade... the brain is built to change in response to experience and in response to training" (Davidson, cited in Boleyn-Fitzgerald, 2010, p. 22). Accordingly, a lightly-engrained *habitus* is not deeply rooted, neuronally speaking, and can therefore be modified by the reflexive 'mental entities' of intention and attention. Indeed, children have demonstrated a tremendous capacity for learning and change across a wide range of behaviors, including music, athletics, and language (Marco-Algarra, et al., 2009; Schlaug, Forgeard, Zhu, Norton, & Winner, 2009). However, a *habitus* conditioned by a lifetime of experience becomes a robust neural network and comes to function as part of the pre-reflexive 'hardware' of the brain. It is quite clear that as we age, it becomes more difficult to acquire new or change old skills due to diminished neuroplasticity (Goh & Park, 2009; Hernandez & Li, 2007). In these instances, intention does not immediately or easily modify one's *habitus*. This is often the case with implicit attitudes about race.

Anti-Black implicit attitudes have been measured in children as young as six (Baron & Banaji, 2006). When these attitudes are reinforced over a lifetime, they doubtlessly become resistant to change; an individual cannot immediately modify them with intention alone. For example, Fazio and his colleagues found that although individuals with a high motivation to control their prejudice were able to lower their scores on an explicit prejudice measure, their implicit attitude scores remained high (Dunton & Fazio, 1997; Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995). This is not to suggest, however, that implicit attitudes are wholly unaffected by intention; in other instances, they may be shaped to a limited degree and aligned with explicit attitudes. A study by LeBel and Gawronski (2006) demonstrated that when participants were instructed to pay attention to their feelings, correlations between their implicit and explicit attitudes increased significantly compared to conditions in which no such instructions were given. Taken together, evidence and argument paint a picture in which the *habitus* of defensive posturing vis-à-vis African-American males may emerge entirely from pre-reflexive (i.e., brain 'hardware') responses or from a particular interactive combination of both reflexive (i.e., 'mental entities') and pre-reflexive responses. This case is instructive because it illustrates how the concept of *habitus* bridges the agency of individuals and the structure of culture: actions are set in motion by dispositions stored in our neural networks as a result of past conditioning while reflexive decision-making is empowered to amend this set of dispositions over time to a degree dictated by the robustness of the neural network (see Elder-Vass, 2007).

Habitus and Change

To study culture is know the fields that have conditioned an individual's *habitus*, but it is not to know how he or she will necessarily act in any given situation. *Habitus* is not a deterministic concept because although an individual may pre-reflexively and reflexively reproduce a given cultural field, change may also be effected in both novel and patterned situations.

The case of change in novel situations is obvious in that individuals must do something 'different' when they encounter circumstances for which they have no conditioned response. First, something different may involve reproducing an 'old' conditioned response in an unfamiliar setting. For example, people have been found to use the same norms of politeness when responding to a text-based computer interviewer as they do when interacting with a flesh-and-blood interviewer (Nass, Moon, & Carney, 1999). Alternatively, something different may involve improvising a 'new' response on the platform of *habitus*. The case of the woman who climbed up the house presented earlier is an example of just such a new response emerging out of *habitus*. This sort of improvisation, as well as the novel use of an 'old' response, represents an opening through which change is introduced in a given cultural field and through which new fields emerge.

As individuals enact agency in novel situations, the change that they effect can emerge both reflexively and pre-reflexively. As an embodied *habitus* encounters new fields, all sorts of behaviors novel in those circumstances become pre-reflexively manifest. The way in which someone sits, stands, or greets another may not be normative in a given field yet conditioning nevertheless dictates its performance. For example, a "hip-swaying gait might be normative for a classed or gendered subject at a certain place and time, but balletic turnout is normative for a self-selected group of skilled bodies that have acquired flexibility in the hip joints under voluntary duress" (Noland, 2009, p. 3). In such circumstances, a 'new' manner of walking will emerge, without the benefit of conscious attention, when an individual crosses fields.

Of course, conscious attention can be applied to one's *habitus* when enacting agency in novel situations. Consider the example of veteran elite runners as described by Tulle (2007). On the one hand, veteran runners have internalized a discourse of decline in which their own aging bodies are increasingly marginalized through expected malfunction and loss. On the other hand, elite runners have also internalized discourses of sport and training which lead to greater levels of both physical and social capital- something quite at odds with their own age *habitus*. These runners are thus positioned in a dialectic of which they are reflexively aware: "between the knowledge that they are both ageing and accomplished athletes" (p. 342). Within

the UK, this circumstance was novel and, through conscious attention, provided ground for the creation of a new social field- the Veteran Movement. As Tulle notes,

Master athletes embodied themselves as both ageful and competent, without recourse to disembodied ageing. They actively and reflexively reconstructed their bodies as well as the meanings attributed to fluctuations in physical and cognitive resources, in the process of controlling identity (p. 343).

As their bodies reflexively (and we must imagine also pre-reflexively) resisted and acceded to their age *habitus*, the case of veteran elite runners illustrates both the presence and complexity of agency in *habitus*. As Foster underscores, "The possibility of a body that is written upon but that also writes asks scholars to approach the body's involvement in any activity with an assumption of potential agency to participate in or resist whatever forms of cultural production are underway" (cited in Noland, 2009, p. 3).

To this point, I have discussed individual agency in cultural fields that are either newly encountered or inchoate. It is of equal, or perhaps more, interest to consider how agency emerges in fields that are often encountered. How is it that individuals may do something different in circumstances for which they already have a conditioned response? Before addressing this question, it is important to note that every situation is always new, even if only indistinctly (i.e., moments are never completely replicated). In addition, one's *habitus* is constantly changing, even if only marginally (i.e., we are never the exact same person). Thus, the continual shift in both people and cultural fields means that agency is always present and that *habitus* is never entirely deterministic. Even so, recognizing these theoretical caveats, can relatively unchanged individuals respond significantly differently in situations that are relatively stable?

If the above question is limited to solely pre-reflexive responses, the answer must be no. There is very little agency present among individuals who do not cross cultural fields when encountering situations deeply engrained in their *habitus* and for which they have not cultivated some degree of reflexivity. Under these particular conditions we may expect that knowledge of the structural constraints within which Others operate will reliably predict their actions. Such conditions may arise regularly within a given population (e.g., Gawans in Papua New Guinea), but are less frequent in contemporary social spaces marked by pervasive change and among participants in the industrialized world who often cross fields. Conditions here tend to produce pre-reflexive agency of the sort described earlier; indeed, "embodiment can initiate

change in *habitus* position by unsettling existing structures and rendering them open to new dispositions” (Tulle, 2007, p. 343). Moreover, conditions of a post-modern world more typically engender reflexive agency due to tensions in field-*habitus* relations. In fact, Crossley (2003) suggests that reflexivity itself is a durable disposition of *habitus* among critically minded individuals. Thus, although pre-reflexive agency can and does occur in highly-normative, contemporary social spaces, the more typical form of agency to consider in these situations is a reflexive one in which individuals attempt to effect change in their own well-conditioned, pre-reflexive responses.

Returning again to the question, can relatively unchanged individuals respond significantly differently in situations that are relatively stable? If reflexive reactions are included, the answer is a conditional yes. As reflexivity is often engendered by our post-modern world, this answer suggests that individuals can shirk off the dictates of culture whenever they so choose. Yet the answer is conditional because, as already discussed, reflexive decision-making can intervene to amend pre-reflexive responses only over time to a degree dictated by the robustness of the neural network. With *habitus*, the route to change is neither simple nor direct.

The first, and perhaps most common, way in which reflexive decision making can effect change in one’s *habitus* is through willpower or ‘response-override’. In this case, an individual attempts to change their conditioned response via conscious direction, substituting one behavior for another. As Levy and Anderson describe it, “in response-override situations one must stop a strong habitual response to a stimulus... Overriding the response is thought to be accomplished by inhibitory processes that suppress it and enable more flexible, context-sensitive control over behavior” (2002, p. 299). As the Mischel studies famously demonstrate, willpower works and one’s ability to exercise it has lifelong consequences (e.g., Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1992). Even so, willpower is easily compromised and is thus an unreliable route to agency for many individuals.

Habitus is comprised of complex neural networks that likely extend through every region of the brain but conscious control is the purview of one region: the prefrontal cortex. As Levy and Anderson explain, “prefrontal regions achieve response override, in part, through active suppression” (2002, p. 304). Such suppression requires significant resources and is thus easily enervated. For example, response-override is energy intensive, therefore it can be achieved only for a limited time. According to Gailliot et al., a “single act of self-control causes glucose levels to drop below optimal levels, thereby impairing subsequent attempts at self-control” (2007, p. 334). Response-override also depends on working memory, thus nearly any cognitive load will

compromise an individual’s ability to execute control (e.g., Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999). Moreover, according to the executive deficit hypothesis (Levy & Anderson, 2008), individuals differ in their ability to achieve response-override. This may be due to differences in working memory capacity (Kane & Engle, 2002), age (Friedman, Nessler, Cycowicz, & Horton, 2009), selected strategies, as well as the physiological and psychological state of an individual (e.g., sleep deprivation; Pilcher & Huffcutt, 1996). Needless to say, individuals do not always, or even usually, achieve response-override because *habitus* is not merely reflexive- it emerges from a complex interplay of both reflexive and pre-reflexive responses.

A second, and perhaps more effective, way in which reflexive decision making can effect change in one’s *habitus* is through field selection. Because *habitus* is pre-reflexively conditioned by a given field, individuals can reflexively select alternative fields in order to help recondition their responses. Consider again the case of implicit attitudes regarding African-American males.

In the popular book *Blink*, Malcom Gladwell shares a story told by Mahzarin Banaji, a co-founder of Project Implicit:

I had a student who used to take the IAT (implicit attitudes test) every day” Banaji says. “It was the first thing he did, and his idea was just to let the data gather as he went. Then this one day, he got a positive association with blacks. And he said, ‘That’s odd. I’ve never gotten that before,’ because we’ve all tried to change our IAT score and we couldn’t. But he’s a track-and-field guy, and what he realized is that he’d spend the morning watching the Olympics.” Our first impressions are generated by our experiences and our environment, which means that we can change our first impressions- we can alter the way we [think unconsciously]- by changing the experiences that comprise those impressions (2005, p. 97).

Indeed, as Gawronski and Bodenhausen argue, “The prototypical case for implicit attitude change... is evaluative conditioning” (2006, p. 697). Thus, when individuals are exposed to stimuli that counter their conditioned responses, their attitudes undergo reconditioning and their *habitus* begins to change (e.g., Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001).

A third, and perhaps most effective, way in which reflexive decision making can effect change in one’s *habitus* is through the cultivation of mindfulness (see Bishop, et al., 2004). Mindfulness is a secular version of Buddhist meditation that has been widely researched and applied across a diversity of contexts, including physical therapy (Mills & Allen, 2000), sport

performance (Marks, 2008), and sleep disorder treatment (Winbush, Gross, & Kreitzer, 2007). In the context of clinical psychology, this “third generation” of cognitive-behavior therapies is united by an approach that does not seek to change “psychological events directly... [but rather seeks] to change the function of those events and the individual’s relationship to them through strategies such as mindfulness, acceptance, or cognitive diffusion” (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2005, p. 4).

As an example of a mindfulness-based approach, consider Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). According to Hayes et al.,

ACT promotes ongoing non-judgmental contact with psychological and environmental events as they occur. The goal is to have clients experience the world more directly so that their behavior is more flexible and thus their actions more consistent with the values that they hold... A sense of self called “self as process” is actively encouraged: the defused, non-judgmental ongoing description of thoughts, feelings, and other private events” (2005, p. 9).

ACT is typical of a mindfulness-based approach in that it emphasizes ‘witnessing’ the mind’s discursive content, as well as embodied sensations, from a distanced and non-judgmental vantage point; the aim is to untangle some degree of enmeshment in one’s own thoughts and reactions. As such, Hayes et al. report that it is a broadly successful intervention:

Reviewing the entire body of evidence suggests that the ACT model seems so far to be working across an unusually broad range of problems, and across a range of severity from psychosis to interventions for ordinary people (e.g., worksite stress interventions) (2005, p. 21).

Because mindfulness is an effective intervention for a host of issues that typically remain beyond ordinary conscious control, it is also likely to be an effective manner of applying reflexivity to enact agency within *habitus*.

What distinguishes mindfulness from more common response-override attempts at conscious control is acceptance. In response-override, areas of the prefrontal cortex attempt to suppress or resist activity in other areas of the brain- especially limbic areas where many of our habitual and automatic behaviors are processed. For example, one limbic brain region- the amygdala- specializes in processing responses of conditioned fear (Davis, 1992). Thus, when a conditioned stimuli is presented (e.g., African-American male), the amygdala produces a fear response

(Cunningham, et al., 2004) that areas of the prefrontal cortex attempt to suppress. Instead of suppressing this amygdala activity, a mindfulness approach attempts to embrace it with awareness; mindfulness attempts to extend conscious sensing beyond the surface of our reactions to their deep, tangled, and conditioned roots. This sort of expansive awareness has, in fact, been observed to correspond with brain activity among expert meditators.

Meditation is associated with stronger activation in paralimbic areas of autonomic control, perhaps due to deeper control of the autonomic system and interoceptive awareness compared to relaxation, but also with the activation of additional fronto-parietal and fronto-limbic brain regions, independent from the physiological relaxation effect (Rubia, 2009, p. 9).

Thus, unlike response-override approaches, mindfulness is less about cortical control and more about cortical development and integration across brain regions, especially across limbic areas. Ultimately, mindfulness is the practice of enriching awareness of our unwanted responses rather than resisting them.

So how is change effected in one’s *habitus* if an individual is simply aware of and accepts their cultural conditioning? It should be noted that acceptance in the context of mindfulness is not the same as passivity or a lack of agency. Rather, acceptance is a tool to diffuse the reactivity that typically accompanies response-override approaches to change. For example, an individual may hate that she feels chronically stressed because various cultural fields have conditioned monochronism in her *habitus*. Instead of feeling bad about feeling stressed, a mindfulness approach would have her cultivate acceptance of her stress response as well as her negative self-judgments. Once she feels OK about feeling stressed and understands that negative self-judgments will arise given her conditioning, reflexive agency has a chance to operate. In this manner, acceptance becomes the ground for exploration of and insight into her otherwise automatic responses. When cultivated, acceptance allows self-regulating wisdom to effect the appropriate changes. As Shapiro et al. (2006) describe the agentic function of mindful acceptance,

[When we develop] the capacity to stand back and witness emotional states [such] as anxiety, we increase our ‘degrees of freedom’ in response to such states, effectively freeing ourselves from automatic behavioral patterns... We are able to attend to the emotion, and choose to self-regulate in ways that foster greater health and well-being” (p. 380).

Because mindfulness increases individuals' autonomy vis-à-vis their own cultural conditioning, it is perhaps the most effective way in which reflexive decision making can effect change in one's own *habitus*.

As just described, *habitus* is a concept that allows individuals to enact reflexive agency in the context of cultural patterning. Doing so, the concept returns us to the dialectic of cultural determinism and individual agency. As emphasized throughout this essay, intercultural communication scholars should be careful to neither overemphasize nor neglect the role that culture plays in shaping an individual's actions. People are conditioned by culture through a lifetime of patterned responses to the various fields in which they operate. To study culture is to know these fields, but it is not to know how an individual will act in any given situation. Instead action emerges from a myriad of both pre-reflexive (e.g., implicit habits) and reflexive conditions (e.g., conscious thoughts). Indeed, we are not bound to reproduce cultural patterns, but we are not entirely free from them either. Instead, we carry an embodied *habitus*- a set of dispositions both enduring and subject to reconditioning- that provides the platform for constrained, agentic, and improvisational action as we face our future.

Conclusion

This essay began with the aim of understanding better the dialectic between cultural determinism and individual agency- a tension at the heart of intercultural communication study.

Through explication of Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, I argued that this dialectic is best imagined as being comprised of both conscious and unconscious elements. *Habitus* bridges the agency of individuals and the structure of culture by framing actions as the product of pre-reflexive, habitual dispositions (stored in our neural networks as a result of past conditioning by cultural fields) and reflexive decision making; conscious intention can intervene to amend our unconscious constitution only over time and to a degree dictated by the robustness of the neural network. With *habitus*, the route to change is neither simple nor direct.

The nature of agency within *habitus* was considered across both novel and patterned situations. In novel situations, some degree of agency is demanded because individuals must do something 'different' in circumstances for which they have no conditioned response. In patterned situations, however, I surmised that individuals have little to no capacity for agency without at least some degree of reflexivity. In cases where reflexivity arises, either due to a critical *habitus* or tensions in field-*habitus* relations, one's capacity for agency can- but does not necessarily- increase. An individual may desire to respond without cultural conditioning but will likely not accomplish this through

willpower alone; because reflexive suppression of pre-reflexive responses requires significant resources, attempts at response-override are easily enervated. Instead, more promising approaches to increase an individual's capacity for agency in the face of deeply-patterned situations include exposure to alternative fields and especially the cultivation of mindfulness.

At heart, mindfulness is awareness of the ways in which we have been conditioned by various cultural fields (as well as idiomatic experiences too). Without this awareness, we may mindlessly respond based entirely on this conditioning and become a mere "repeater station... for the culture" (Young, 1996, p. 37). When we resist cultivating this awareness- and there are indeed many good reasons we become attached to our own mindlessness (e.g., self-uncertainty discomfort; Hogg, 2009)- we live reactively and thus minimize our capacity for agency. However, when causes and conditions help us cultivate a mindful 'gap' (Stapp, 2010) between circumstance and response, we are on the path towards living wisely and more agentially within the structure of our own *habitus*.

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