Habitus, reflexivity, and the realization of intercultural capital: The (unfulfilled) potential of intercultural education

Andreas Pöllmann

To cite this article: Andreas Pöllmann (2016) Habitus, reflexivity, and the realization of intercultural capital: The (unfulfilled) potential of intercultural education, Cogent Social Sciences, 2:1, 1149915, DOI: 10.1080/23311886.2016.1149915

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2016.1149915

© 2016 The Author(s). This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license

Published online: 22 Feb 2016.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 12880

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 5 View citing articles
Habitus, reflexivity, and the realization of intercultural capital: The (unfulfilled) potential of intercultural education

Andreas Pöllmann

Cogent Social Sciences (2016), 2: 1149915
Habitus, reflexivity, and the realization of intercultural capital: The (unfulfilled) potential of intercultural education

Andreas Pöllmann

Abstract: Nowhere does the need to appreciate a diverse range of different intercultural experiences appear more obvious than in the context of intercultural education. Yet, in times of neoliberal hegemony over educational politics and policies, less socio-culturally dominant and often more colloquial funds of intercultural knowledge risk to suffer continued institutional marginalization and curricular obliteration. To counter such forms of symbolic violence and to create learning environments that value a wide range of processes of intercultural capital realization, intercultural education needs to overcome ideas of “bad habitus” and “good reflexivity”, for they prematurely discredit the value of people’s practical sense, while failing to problematize the sociocultural contingency of their reflexive capacities. In a critical appropriation of Bourdieu’s conceptualization of human agency, the present article highlights the reconcilability of reflexivity and habitus, with a particular interest in processes of intercultural capital realization and the (unfulfilled) potential of intercultural education.

Subjects: Education - Social Sciences; Multicultural Education; Political Sociology; Race & Ethnic Studies; Social Class; Social Theory; Sociology & Social Policy; Sociology of Culture; Sociology of Education; Sociology of Knowledge

Keywords: Archer; Bourdieu; habitus; human agency; intercultural capital; intercultural education; neoliberal hegemony; reflexivity; recognition

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Andreas Pöllmann (PhD 2008, MA 2004, Department of Sociology, University of Essex, UK) is a full-time associate researcher at the Instituto de Investigaciones sobre la Universidad y la Educación, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Circuito Cultural Universitario, Coyoacán 04510, Mexico, D.F., Mexico E-mail: apollm@unam.mx

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT
This article illustrates the importance of valuing both intuitive and reflexive forms of intercultural learning. With the background of intensifying processes of economic globalization and the worldwide spread of neoliberal educational politics and policies, it urges for inclusive forms of intercultural education that avoid uncritical celebrations of reflexivity, private initiative, and individual talent. At the same time, it underlines the vital importance of an intercultural education that recognizes a wide range of less formally established funds of intercultural knowledge. Throughout, the article advocates a perspective that views processes of individual development as closely related to the respective contextual circumstances, with a particular interest in implications in terms of sociocultural justice.
1. Introduction

No doubt agents do have an active apprehension of the world. No doubt they construct
their vision of the world. But this construction is carried out under structural constraints.
(Bourdieu, 1989, p. 18)

Since its conception, Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of habitus has received a controversial reception
among theorists of human agency. Celebrated by some, rejected by others, but always pertinent to
both—whether as a conceptual building block and a complex idea worthwhile of constructive criti-
cism and further theoretical development or as an antithetical scapegoat. In the latter (rather un-
fortunate) case, the concept tends to serve its scholarly detractors merely as a negative foil for their
own theoretical propositions.1 Margaret Archer, in particular, has become accustomed to delineating
her multidimensional idea of different cognitive forms of human reflexivity2—and, more generally,
her morphogenetic vision of personal and sociocultural development—in stark contrast to Bourdieu’s

If viewed from a late Archerian perspective, habitus ultimately appears as little more than an in-
creasingly irrelevant, if not entirely obsolete, anachronistic residual that, if anything, stands in the
way of auto-reflexive “internal conversations” of “fractured” or otherwise “confused” late modern
individuals. Such a radical questioning of habitus—of its raison d’être so to speak—is as empirically
problematic as heuristically unsound (Adams, 2006; Akram & Hogan, 2015; Decoteau, 2015; Elder-
Vass, 2007; Farrugia, 2013; Farrugia & Woodman, 2015; Fleetwood, 2008; Sayer, 2010). Most ironi-
cally, perhaps, the drastic outcasting of habitus becomes possible only from a view of human agency
in which habitus and reflexivity feature as strictly distinct, unrelated, and irreconcilable parts of
dissimilar coins. A particularly tragic dimension to the irony of such crude antagonistic dichoto-
mies—and one more or less explicitly woven into Archer’s morphogenetic approach—alludes to
value-laden phantasies about “bad habitus” and “good reflexivity”.

This article departs from Archerian-type caricatures of habitus and reflexivity as quintessentially
irreconcilable and differentially valued dimensions of human agency, since they obscure their actual
interdependency and joint significance for contextually embedded human (inter)actions in gener-
al—and for processes of intercultural capital realization in particular. In order to make explicit right
from the beginning and productively work with a conception of human agency that reconciles peo-
ple’s intuitive and reflexive capacities within a Bourdieusian framework, the French sociologist’s idea
of habitus as “structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (Bourdieu,
1990, p. 53) requires some additional qualification.

Concretely, for the purposes of the present contribution and as a suggestion for further conceptual
development, habitus shall be more specifically defined as structured psychosomatic structures
that emerge from the respective individual’s (more or less conscious) experiences in pertinent fields as
well as structuring psychosomatic structures that form the “operational basis” of his or her (inter)
actions. In other words, the respective psychosomatic structures are both product and producer of
contextually embedded practices. They mediate and “guide” the reception, memorizing, and proces-
sual generation of people’s sensory impressions and expressions.

Based on a spirit of critical appreciation according to which “an invitation to think with Bourdieu is
of necessity an invitation to think beyond Bourdieu, and against him whenever required” (Wacquant,
1992, p. xiv), the following discussion first outlines a notion of human agency that embraces habitus,
reflexivity, and practical sense as its co-defining and interrelated constituents. It then moves on to
illustrate the centrality of both reflexive and intuitive elements of human agency in processes of
intercultural capital realization—within and beyond established forms of formal education. The next
section problematizes the sociocultural contingency of processes of intercultural capital realization,
with a particular focus on the (unfulfilled) potential of intercultural education in times of neoliberal
hegemony. The subsequent and final section rearticulates the most important ideas by way of conclusion.

2. Beyond “bad habitus” and “good reflexivity”
Contrary to common misrepresentations, habitus “is not a fate, not a destiny” (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 45). Combining “constancy and variation” (Bourdieu, 2000; p. 161), it “is as remote from creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from simple mechanical reproduction of the original conditioning” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 55). As “a product of history, that is of social experience and education, it may be changed by history, that is by new experiences, education or training” (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 45, original emphasis). Habitus can, and in most cases will, contain a complex set of plural, historically contingent, and contradictory (sets of) dispositions. Even comparatively static and little complex varieties of habitus do not constitute monolithic systems of ever-repetitive neurobehavioral mechanics. Importantly, however, while habitus can (become) more or less flexible, it is per se non-reflexive.

As much as it makes no analytical sense to construe habitus itself as reflexive, it is problematic to extrapolate its operational limits beyond the level of individual agency. Different individuals may share certain “judgments of taste” according to their particular class of habitus (Bourdieu, 1984), but a social class itself does not have a habitus. In a similar vein, different individuals’ feelings of national attachment may show important intersubjective similarities or overlaps (Pöllmann, 2008, 2009, 2012) that—while possibly indicative of a certain national culture or prevailing national doxa—do not form the habitus of a particular nation. The same logic applies to dubious notions of “family habitus” and “institutional habitus” that, in fact, allude to forms of group ethos, collective spirit, or other doxai—as Atkinson (2011) so convincingly demonstrates.

Crucially, habitus does not stand in diametrical contrast to reflexivity. As a psychosomatic receptor, memory, and generative matrix, it both evolves from and mediates reflexive as well as intuitive contextually embedded practices. Depending on the respective field conditions, and at different points in time and space, “the same individual may be highly reflexive with regard to some aspects of his or her behavior, but strongly driven by social conditioning with regard to others” (Elder-Vass, 2007, p. 342). The resulting complexity of different (contextually variant) expressions of human agency can be imagined as oscillating between two ideal-typical poles: practical sense and reflexivity.

Within this model of human agency, the notion of practical sense comprises intuitive ways of acting, feeling, perceiving, and thinking that—while not exclusive of habituated reflexivities and reflexive reflexes—distinguish it from more conscious and mindful deliberations or forms of reflexivity. As a “natural” extension of habitus, practical sense implies an intuitive familiarity with the field conditions in (relation to) which it operates—“a feel for the game in the sense of a capacity for practical anticipation of the ‘upcoming’ future contained in the present” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 66).

The notion of reflexivity, on the other hand, inherently implies a certain degree of conscious awareness and a critical distance from the respective object(s) of reflection. Even so, however, reflexive human agency is never purely reflexive—at least in the sense that it always and necessarily depends on habituated processes of recognition, memorization, and articulation. Clearly, not every neurological stimulus, psychosocial memory, or cognitive cerebral function that underlies and shapes the unfolding of an individual’s “reflexive deliberations” can itself be fully reflexive; if it were so, it would lead to an eternal self-referential regress and, ultimately, to the end of socioculturally engaged practice.

As much as it appears unwise to equate a practical intercultural sense hastily with dull routines or primordial sociocultural habits, it seems reasonable to view claims to the emancipatory (pedagogic) potential of reflexive deliberations critically in terms of their sociocultural and ideological origins and interests (Adams, 2003; Atkinson, 2010; Caetano, 2015). Even if “reflexivity is often portrayed as a strategy for fostering intercultural competence and tackling ethnocentrism, it should not be
assumed that it always has a benign impact or leads to critical distance from one's own standpoints” (Blasco, 2012, p. 485).

Ultimately, the relative interpersonal and sociocultural relevance of both reflexivity and practical sense—for from constituting a hermetic ontological given—always emerges in (relation to) the concrete situation and context in which human (inter)actions actually take place. An invitation to engage in an open reflection about different conceptions of race, racialized identities, and forms of racism, for example, might well feel more appropriate in a seminar at college or university than at the onset of a casual encounter between individuals of actual or perceived differences in racial background.

While Bourdieu’s work is replete with references to the complexity and situationality of human agency, it is fair to say that it tends to underestimate the range, plurality, and frequency of “ordinary” people’s reflexive practices (Lahire, 2011; Mouzelis, 2007; Noble & Watkins, 2003). On the other hand, and in welcome contrast to less contextually embedded approaches to the study of human agency, his conceptual framework reminds us of the vital importance to conceive the development of people’s reflexive capacities as closely related to their positions within fields of struggle over (symbolic) power.

Notwithstanding the analytical force of Bourdieu’s field theory (Bourdieu, 1985a, 1993; Wacquant, 1989) and the importance to highlight the intimate relationship between pertinent field conditions and people’s habitus, a broader conception of salient contextual conditions would place more emphasis on people as both positioned within pertinent fields and their acting and interacting elements. After all, a field can be(come) pertinent not only “as a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97), but also as a frame for interpersonal and social relations—including those that lie at the heart of processes of intercultural capital realization.

3. Processes of intercultural capital realization6

“Intercultural capital can be realized in terms of (a combination of) awareness, acquisition, and application” (Pöllmann, 2013, p. 2). Processes of acquisition and application can be more or less intuitive or reflexive, direct (e.g. in the course of international student exchange programs) or indirect (e.g. via books, television, or the Internet), iterative or continuous, inclusive or exclusive, enabled or constrained. In all their empirical complexity, however, they are always intimately—albeit not necessarily explicitly—linked to (different) cultures, that is, “pervious, evolving, more or less consciously learned, and more or less closely “shared” frames of perception, thought, and (inter)action that are both shaped by and shape their (histories of) objectification and institutionalization” (Pöllmann, 2013, p. 1).

With the background of increasing global interconnectedness, intercultural capital constitutes not only an evermore important economic asset and a vital interactional resource, but also a key marker of sociocultural distinction (Pöllmann & Sánchez Grailliet, 2015). First and foremost, those at the margins of pertinent fields, whose sociocultural positioning does not “favor a habitual, effortless, and largely taken-for-granted embodiment of highly prized and widely convertible intercultural capital,” (Pöllmann, 2013, p. 5) rely on a socially just and culturally inclusive intercultural education that enables and officially recognizes a wide range of both intuitive and reflexive forms of intercultural learning. After all, the degree of objectification in and through institutions “guarantees the permanence and cumulativity of material and symbolic acquisitions which can then subsist without the agents having to recreate them continuously and in their entirety by deliberate action” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 130).

The relative exchange value of individually embodied reservoirs of intercultural capital depends fundamentally on the realities and potentialities of their objectification and institutionalization within pertinent educational, sociocultural, and political fields. Those already favorably positioned within
such fields of struggle for (symbolic) power—by having access to influential and well-resourced family networks, by social class privilege, and/or by membership in dominant ethno-cultural, religious or other groups—will meet no major obstacles in applying their respective intercultural capital acquisitions. On the contrary, those less favorably positioned will have to challenge the status quo and by implication the dominant doxa of taken-for-granted and officially established (symbolic) hierarchies of differentially valued capital resources (Pöllmann, 2013).

When talking about differentially valued capital resources, it is worth considering Yosso’s (2005) cautioning that Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital has frequently been (mis)used to construct and justify illusive imageries of cultural inferiority and superiority. Yet, while misrepresentations of that kind are still alive and well, they have long been unmasked as blatantly distorting the famous French sociologist’s academic contributions and public interventions (Harker, 1984; Swartz, 1997; Wacquant, 2004). Indeed, in times of neoliberal hegemony over educational politics and policies (Hill & Kumar, 2009; Hursh, 2007; Klees, 2008; Plehwe, Walpen, & Neunhöffer, 2006; Torres, 2009), Bourdieu’s conceptual framework offers an alternative vision that complements rather than contradicts other critical approaches to the study of sociocultural inequalities and the (re)production of privilege, (symbolic) power, and (symbolic) forms of domination.

Contributions from the realms of Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 1970, 1973; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007) and Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001)—as well as notions of “funds of knowledge” and “community cultural wealth” (Moll, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt, & Moll, 2011; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992)—could be usefully reconciled with Bourdieu’s (1986) forms of capital. In fact, the constructive reconciliation of the respective approaches may well be vital to the advancement of (symbolic) struggles for the recognition of a wider range of more or less consciously internalized intercultural knowledge and skills—and of the different contexts in which they are acquired (e.g. in bicultural families, in multicultural neighborhoods, in schools and universities with diverse student populations, or as a result of voluntary or forced migration).

Direct in situ intercultural experiences can offer particularly “context-intensive” opportunities for intercultural learning. When based on physical rather than virtual movement across cultures, such personal experiences can lead to insights into what it feels to be (perceived as) the “Other” that may—especially in cases where they coincide with changes in the relative currency value of hitherto embodied capital resources—challenge and gradually modify existing receptive, memorial, prosesual, and generative psychosomatic structures. The respective alterations in habitus can “interrupt” both long-accustomed practical sense and taken-for-granted ways of being reflexive, possibly stimulating new forms of reflexive intercultural awareness and a renewed feel for the intercultural game.

It is worth noting that Bourdieu himself concedes the possibility of habitus crises through encounters with new or significantly altered field conditions (Bourdieu, 1990, 2000). But it has to be made more explicit than in (what seems to follow from) his work that such habitus crises do not merely, nor on many occasions primarily, involve agents who find themselves confronted with new objectified structural conditions (e.g. institutions and laws). Instead, it is largely through contact and interaction with other individuals or groups where they get to feel the power of new structural forces—as, for example, in the case of international migrants who find themselves immersed in a world of new linguistic, ethno-racial, religious, or sociocultural majority backgrounds.

There is indeed good reason to believe that direct intercultural interactions should play a vital part in the development of both a practical intercultural sense and a critical intercultural reflexivity. After all, “the more experience of other cultures a learner has, the more easily they will see the relativity of their own culture or cultures” (Byram, 2003, p. 65). Paradoxically, however, in the realms of schooling and school management, the pedagogical significance of extracurricular and often more habitual forms of intercultural learning still tend to be underestimated and negatively contrasted with the transmission and reflective analysis of predesigned curricular contents. To be sure, the point here is...
not to discredit the latter—whose didactic significance has been tried and tested for decades and centuries—but to problematize their widespread predominance as counterproductive to a more holistic realization of intercultural capital and the development of socioculturally just and inclusive intercultural learning environments.

4. Realizing intercultural capital through intercultural education: prospects and limitations

Pedagogical action can [...], because of and despite the symbolic violence it entails, open the possibility of an emancipation founded on awareness and knowledge of the conditionings undergone and on the imposition of new conditionings designed durably to counter their effects. (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 340)

Schools, colleges, and universities hold, no doubt, the potential for facilitating both reflexive and intuitive forms of intercultural learning. They can pave the way for intercultural dialog through diverse and inclusive institutional arrangements. They may offer opportunities for cross-cultural mobility to those who cannot draw on supportive family networks, whose voluntarily adopted or externally ascribed group memberships may place them at the margins of mainstream society, or who might face otherwise unfavorable circumstances. However, as much as institutions of formal education can inform and enable, they can also feed into the naïve assumption that the legal provision of formal equality alone would suffice to guarantee “identical educational opportunities”—with the (unintended) result of cementing existing sociocultural inequalities under the veil of an “unbiased meritocracy” (Bourdieu, 1974; Bourdieu & De Saint Martin, 1974; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Lamentably, global trends toward the commodification of education—and the respective economic logic and business interests involved—tend to privilege entrepreneurial skills, private initiative, and cognitive forms of (economically viable) instrumental reflexivity over cooperative forms of learning and the vision of a more just and socioculturally inclusive world (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1998; Giroux, 1988, 2012; Matthews & Sidhu, 2005; McLaren, 1999). Worse still, the commodification of education contributes to the marginalization of already vulnerable individuals and groups (Apple, 2001; Connell, 2013; Giroux, 2004; McLaren, 2005). The collection of tuition fees and the lack of appropriate compensatory maintenance grants, for example, aggravate the situation of those students who are, due to their unfavorable sociocultural positioning, already less likely to achieve higher levels of formal education in general, and of highly convertible varieties of intercultural capital in particular.

In one way or the other, neoliberal ideologies of educational mercantilization have made it a pervasive and enduring fashion to lay the burden of responsibility for personal successes and failures almost entirely on the individual—on his or her motivations, deliberations, and willful efforts. However, as much as it is necessary to stimulate the creative power of reflexive practice and to highlight the value of motivating individuals to maximize their potential, it is important to avoid uncritical celebrations of private initiatives. For it should not be forgotten that the realization and realizability of people’s personal capital resources depend to an important extent on circumstances that are beyond their (direct) control (Pöllmann, 2013). Without a critical consideration of the respective field conditions, the promotion of people’s creative potential and reflexive capacities—which is supposed to lead to (a sense of) empowerment—in fact risks fueling unrealistic expectations in the face of adverse contextual circumstances and, by implication, feelings of guilt and self-blame.

The point here is certainly not to accuse everyone involved in what goes more or less explicitly under the banner of “neoliberal education reform” of scrupulous economic motivations and capitalist self-interests. Many calls for individual initiative, deliberate action, and a spirit of enterprise—neoliberal or else—undoubtedly have the very best intentions at heart. But good pedagogical intentions alone are not enough—at least in the sense that their expected individual-level effects
cannot be meaningfully separated from structural injustices in pertinent educational and sociocultural environments (Banks, 2008; Cummins, 2000; Gorski, 2008; Olneck, 2000).

Meanwhile, past decades testify to a seemingly inexorable academic hype about the pervasive quasi-inevitable emergence of increasingly volatile and less homogenous structural conditions and forces on the one hand, and the growing significance of reflexive individuality on the other (Archer, 2007, 2014; Beck, 1992; Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994; Castells, 1996; Giddens, 1991, 1992; Lash, 1999). In times of intensifying processes of economic globalization, it is no doubt tempting to proclaim a new age of reflexivity as Margaret Archer has done in her recent book on *The Reflexive Imperative in Late Modernity* (Archer, 2012). But in failing to duly engage with the sociocultural conditions that are likely to enable or constrain people’s reflexive capacities, Archer’s “narrative of social change becomes uncritically optimistic, unable to understand the material inequalities which continue to structure late modern subjectivities” (Farrugia & Woodman, 2015, p. 2).

To be sure, many parts of the world have seen a rising demand for a flexible and adaptable workforce, creating a climate in which workers need to invest a great deal in (the renewal of) their qualifications and skills. However, whether and to what extent such an economic climate implies businesses that desire to employ reflexive workers, who critically interrogate their situation beyond the range of (technical) reflections required to carry out their job efficiently, poses an open question that too often remains unanswered. At the very least, instead of rushing into uncritical celebrations of reflexivity, it would appear sound to recognize that “reflexive action is not always associated with morphogenesis, nor does habitual action remain doomed to reproduce the social order” (Decoteau, 2015, p. 9).

If it is generally advisable to think beyond notions of “good reflexivity” and “bad habitus”, it is vital to do so within intercultural education. Consider, for instance, the learning of non-native languages, which arguably plays a crucial part in the development of any more substantial intercultural literacy (Burck, 2005; Byram & Risager, 1999; Fuss, Garcia-Albacete, & Rodriguez-Monter, 2004; Starkey & Osler, 2003). Yet, when limited to classroom-based deliberations about vocabulary, grammar, and syntax, it contributes comparatively little to the development of a critical intercultural awareness—and less to the generation of a practical intercultural sense (Byram, 2008).

It matters greatly what types of embodied intercultural capital schools, colleges, and universities recognize as legitimate and worthy of official certification (i.e. as worthy of being transformed into institutionalized intercultural capital). Consider, for example, how educational systems “directly helped to devalue popular modes of expression, dismissing them as ‘slang’ and ‘gibberish’ [...] and to impose recognition of the legitimate language” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 49)—that is, more precisely, the (arbitrary) legitimization of the dominant language. To counter such forms of symbolic violence and to create learning environments that empower students of diverse sociocultural backgrounds and with different capital resources (or funds of knowledge), intercultural education needs to:

- Enable and value a wide range of reflexive and intuitive processes of intercultural capital realization
- Question dominant notions of reflexivity and practical sense
- Combine classroom-based instruction with opportunities to gain less formalized firsthand intercultural experiences
- Dislocate habitus through cross-cultural mobility

To be sure, these recommendations need to be read in relation to the respective sociocultural and political field conditions at hand. But in spite of their contextual contingency, they may serve as orientation in scholarly, institutional, and public debates over the official recognition and valuation of different empirical varieties of intercultural capital. To emphasize anew how such endeavors may draw on Pierre Bourdieu’s conceptual legacy; this would appear to be a fitting moment to revisit some of the central points raised in the course of the present article by way of conclusion.
5. Conclusion

Contrary to persistent misperceptions, habitus is neither diametrically opposed to nor irreconcilable with reflexivity. As a psychosomatic receptor, memory, and generative matrix, it both evolves from and mediates reflexive as well as intuitive contextually embedded practices. While undoubtedly forming a constitutive part of human agency, it by no means implies “the fate that some people read into it. Being the product of history, it is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 133; original emphasis). Depending on the nature of personal experiences within (different) cultures and fields of struggle for (symbolic) power, an individual can acquire new reflexive and new intuitive funds of intercultural knowledge that he or she may previously not have known of and perhaps considered as unknowable or not worth knowing.

To be sure, unknowing can include genuine forms of not knowing (Thrift, 1996)—in the sense of being unable to know at a particular time and in certain cultural and geopolitical contexts. Many times, however, meanings and knowledge are accessible through conscious reflexive investigations or more accidental intuitive discovery—both of which are mediated by the respective individual’s habitus—and both of which can be substantially enabled or constrained by fields of formal education and the broader sociocultural environment. Schools, colleges, and universities, for example, may or may not provide opportunities for the kind of habitus dislocations through cross-cultural mobility that are likely to stimulate the development of students’ intercultural reflexivity and practical intercultural sense.

Nowhere does the need to appreciate a diverse range of different intercultural experiences appear more obvious than in the context of intercultural education. Yet, in times of neoliberal hegemony over educational politics and policies, less socioculturally dominant and often more colloquial funds of intercultural knowledge risk to suffer continued institutional marginalization and curricular obliteration. It is within this broader context of (symbolic) domination that often unsuspected pedagogical preferences for (allegedly) reflexive knowledge acquisitions over alternative and less formally established forms of learning need to be subjected to critical scrutiny. After all, such pedagogical preferences do not merely relate to questions of didactic method or educational esthetics, but are likely to affect students’ chances of intercultural development and of getting their particular personal intercultural experiences and skills officially recognized or not.

If the aim is to achieve more genuinely enabling intercultural learning environments, institutional support needs to go beyond legal guarantees of formal equality and toward concrete measures to value a wide range of both intuitive and reflexive intercultural funds of knowledge—including those informally acquired at the “margins” of dominant sociocultural institutions and groups. It is high time to overcome ideas of “bad habitus” and “good reflexivity”, for they prematurely discredit the value of people’s practical sense, while failing to problematize the sociocultural contingency of their reflexive capacities.

As much as it is desirable to conceive the potential for reflexive practice as germane to all humankind, it is deceitful to take its realization and realizability for granted. Uncritical celebrations of reflexivity—fueled by ignorance toward the particular field conditions that may enhance or inhibit its development—distort systematic forms of sociocultural inequality, marginalization, discrimination, and disadvantage, while exaggerating the explanatory weight of (alleged) differences in private initiative, introspective capacities, and individual talent. Bourdieu’s legacy continues to provide invaluable inspiration to counter such voluntaristic reductionism and the symbolic violence it entails.

Funding
The author received no direct funding for this research.

Author details
Andreas Pöllmann
E-mail: apollm@unam.mx

1 Instituto de Investigaciones sobre la Universidad y la Educación, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Circuito Cultural Universitario, Coyoacán 04510, México, D.F., Mexico.

Citation information
Cite this article as: Habitus, reflexivity, and the realization of intercultural capital: The (unfulfilled) potential of intercultural education, Andreas Pöllmann, Cogent Social Sciences (2016), 2: 1149915.
Notes
1. Ironically, while Bourdieu’s notion of habitus continues to inspire creative research around the world, its most radical and unforgiving critics still appear as repetitive and alarmed as ever—albeit that they are noteworthy mostly for their strikingly selective and superficial reading of the prolific French sociologist’s empirically grounded contributions to social theory. Alexander’s (1995) critique continues to stand out as a particularly presumptuous misrepresentation of Bourdieu’s conceptual intentions.
2. Margaret Archer distinguishes between communicative reflexivity, autonomous reflexivity, meta-reflexivity, and fractured reflexivity—all of which she construes as involving (important degrees of) meditative internal conversations on behalf of the respective individual agents (Archer, 2003, 2007, 2012).
3. After all, “the mobilisation of skills and dispositions in a specific interaction situation is hardly ever unproblematic” (Mouzelis, 1991, p. 138)—or, for example, evidenced by research that reveals “considerable inconsistency of behavior across situations and between verbal measures of a disposition and specific nonverbal behaviors” (Ajzen, 2005, p. 39).
4. Sweetman’s (2003) idea of a “reflexive habitus”, for example, can and has been critiqued for conflating distinct dimensions of human agency (Archer, 2012). It is, however, worth recalling that the present article attempts to overcome such confluences not by rejecting any possibility of reconciliation between habitus and reflexivity—as Archer does—but by analytically locating the latter (together with the notion of practical sense) as integral extensions of the former.
5. Given “that the truth of [... a particular] interaction is never entirely contained in the interaction” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 81) itself, and that different (groups of) interactants often hold unequal shares in (symbolic) power, the conceptual incorporation of relationships between people constitutes a valuable extension rather than a viable alternative to “Bourdieuian field theory”. Undoubtedly, the latter—and particularly its recurrent emphasis on homologies “between the space of positions and the space of dispositions” (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 157)—has generated abundant (and often legitimate) criticism. Rather unfortunately, however, most of the more radical rejections of any (partial) duality between psychosomatic and objectified structures have tended to ignore Bourdieu’s timely and explicit cautioning that “one must be careful not to treat homology of position, a resemblance within difference, as an identity of condition” (Bourdieu, 1985b, p. 737).
6. In the present article, the expression “processes of intercultural capital realization” serves as shorthand for “processes of realization of embodied intercultural capital”. Moreover, when mentioned without qualifying adjective, “intercultural capital” stands for “embodied intercultural capital”.
7. For instance—as experiences from the realm of bilingual and intercultural education in Mexico’s indigenous communities illustrate—even well-meaning governmental programs and initiatives can struggle significantly under the weight of (their own involvement in) systematic inequalities and asymmetric distributions of (symbolic) power (Fuentes-Morales, 2008; Hornel, 2008; Pöllmann & Sánchez Graillet, 2015; Stavenhagen, 2015).

References


