Bourdieu and the quest for intercultural transformations

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Abstract

This conceptual article aims to contribute to a better understanding of intercultural transformations at the nexus of different and differentially realized cultural forms. In contrast to popular teleological models of intercultural development, the present Bourdieusian approach does not allude to any kind of sequential progress towards certain predefined ends. Accordingly, previously existing clusters of embodied, objectified, and institutionalized (inter)cultural capital are conceived as being supplemented or reconfigured rather than replaced in the course of more or less (dis)comforting processes of intercultural capital realization. With the intention to overcome the pitfalls of both cognitive reductionism and cultural essentialism, the respective theoretical ideas culminate in the proposition of pertinent research questions. Whether employed as a definitive or sensitizing concept, the notion of intercultural capital is meant to serve as a flexible and problem-based tool that promises to guide or inform the empirical-analytical quest for intercultural transformations.

Keywords

Bourdieu, cross-cultural mobility, cultural forms, (dis)comforting intercultural capital realizations, intercultural transformations

Introduction: cultural forms and transformations

Drawing on Bourdieu’s influential notions of ‘habitus’ and ‘cultural capital’, cultures can be defined ‘as 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). Importantly, this definition implies certain degrees of psychosomatic and structural continuity, without evoking ideas of cultural essentialism. Moreover, in highlighting the joined significance of processes of embodiment, objectification and institutionalization, it averts from tapping into the pitfall of cognitive reductionism.

Reducing cultures to some sort of ‘software of the mind’ (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010) means underestimating the existence and power of objectified and institutionalized forms of cultural capital which, once acquired, ‘subsist without the agents having to recreate them continuously and in their entirety by deliberate action’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 130). Far from being trivial, the extent to which the respective objectifications and institutionalizations recognize and value the embodied cultural resources of different individuals or groups has direct implications in terms of sociocultural justice.

People’s cultural embodiments concern, but are not limited to the mind and mindful reasoning. Their (non-verbalized) emotions and feelings that may, for example, be attached to other individuals, groups, symbols, objects or places – to smells, tastes, music or esthetics – are of no lesser importance than their conscious cognitions and (allegedly) rational communications. There is indeed good reason to believe that even rationalized
subjective perceptions and experiences of ‘culture’ involve a complex range of unconscious kinesthetic-tactile and emotional processes. The respective processes are, in turn, not independent of the aforementioned cultural objectifications and institutionalizations – a circumstance that inevitably brings Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* into play.

In keeping with a recent adaptation of one of the French sociologist’s most famous definitions, *habitus* consists of ‘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’ (Pöllmann, 2016, p. 3, original emphasis). Constituting ‘a psychosomatic receptor, memory, and generative matrix, it both evolves from and mediates reflexive as well as intuitive contextually embedded practices’ (Pöllmann, 2016, p. 9). In doing so, it does remain open to modifications over time and space. As ‘a product of history, that is of social experience and education, it may be *bechanced by history*, that is by new experiences, education or training’ (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 45, original emphasis). It ‘can, and in most cases will, contain a complex set of plural, historically contingent, and contradictory (sets of) dispositions’ (Pöllmann, 2016, p.4).

Drawing on this (re)conceptualization of *habitus*, it makes sense to imagine ‘culture’ as constituted by *field-specific inter-individual habitus overlaps* – whereby the latter are conceived as complementary rather than contradictory to the aforementioned image of ‘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). Both ways of imagining ‘culture’ provide a conceptual foundation for empirical-analytical distinctions of different clusters of cultural *capital*, without obscuring the fact that the respective cultural differences are always relational, contextually contingent and open to transformation across time and space. Put the other way around, contrary to potential appearances, cultural similarities are hardly ever replete of exceptions and contradictions – and as such never conclusively definable or defined.

Indeed, the study of cultures requires a critical stance towards any form of essentialist stereotyping – a point well illustrated by Paul Mecheril’s welcome critique of essentializing social constructions of ‘cultural difference’ (Mecheril, 2020) and, more specifically, his objection to official German classifications of residents into ‘foreigners’ and ‘nonforeigners’ or those without and those with a so-called ‘immigrant background’ (Dirim & Mecheril, 2018; Mecheril, 2006). Mecheril’s critical engagement with such classificatory dichotomies is particularly valuable in view of the fact that uses of or references to them frequently, if not predominantly, hold negative connotations. In Germany and many other contemporary societies, being catalogued as a ‘foreigner’ or as having an ‘immigrant background’ all too often goes along with associations of some kind of (educational) deficit. It should go without saying that for all those concerned the consequences of being unfavorably marked as different or deviating from some kind of socially constructed norm are far from trivial.

However, as necessary as it is to refute essentializing social constructions of cultural difference, it is also vital to acknowledge that not all notions of cultural difference have negative connotations and that, precisely because of being the result of processes of social construction, even notions of cultural difference with negative connotations hold the potential of being transformed into ones with positive connotations. The taking of such a more differentiated perspective reveals a paradox in Mecheril’s important preoccupation with pejoratively discriminating and essentializing social constructions of the ‘other’, the ‘alien’ or the ‘strange’. That is, in tending to suspect any analytical reference to *cultural difference* or distinction of *different cultural forms* of some kind of malevolent essentialism, it also tends to underestimate the liberating potential of counter-hegemonic and empowering assertions of cultural distinctiveness.

Not without reason, a positively connoted notion of cultural difference is perfectly compatible with UNESCO’s (2005) ‘Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions’. The right to be different and to differ is particularly pertinent in the case of marginalized individuals or groups. For those subjected to marginalization or exclusion, asserting their cultural distinctiveness is often vital in initiating and sustaining a struggle for what they feel, believe or perceive dear to themselves and others and which they wish to get back, protect or achieve individually or collectively (Pöllmann, 2013). As shall become
clearer in the course of this article, the recognition and valuation of different cultural forms are closely related to intercultural transformations at the levels of embodiment, objectification, and institutionalization.

In what follows, our Bourdieusian quest for intercultural transformations takes us first to different forms of intercultural capital, with a particular focus on the contents, modes, and contexts of their realization in terms of acquisition and application. We then broaden the theoretical perspective in relation to the often-suspected transformational impact of cross-cultural mobility which, in turn, leads us on to consider the (dis)comforting potential of intercultural capital realizations. Based on the respective conceptual considerations, the article concludes with an outlook on empirical research on intercultural transformations.

The realization of different forms of intercultural capital

The present Bourdieusian engagement with (inter)cultural forms and transformations rests on the believe that not every theoretical and empirical-analytical distinction or differentiation automatically constitutes a negative discrimination. Accordingly, it conceives no logical contradiction in acknowledging the fact that even the seemingly most apparent psychosomatic and material manifestations of ‘cultural uniqueness’ are the product of complex processes of human perception, contact, interchange and ‘mixing’, while at the same time asserting that it is analytically valuable – and ethically irreprehensible – to distinguish between more or less (dis)similar clusters of (inter)cultural capital.

Bourdieu (1986) influentially distinguished between embodied cultural capital in terms of people’s incorporated cultural knowledge and know-how – objectified cultural capital as manifested through literary or musical productions, sculptures, paintings, machinery or tools – and institutionalized cultural capital, such as the official degrees and certificates provided by schools, colleges, and universities. Notwithstanding the continued relevance of these ‘classic’ forms of cultural capital, with the background of global interdependence, ‘intercultural capital emerges as an increasingly significant type of cultural capital and marker of sociocultural distinction’ (Pöllmann, 2013, p. 1).

Experience of living abroad, intercultural friendships, and foreign language skills have been used as empirical indicators of embodied intercultural capital (Pöllmann & Sánchez Graillet, 2015). Products of writing, science, but also of art and architecture, as far as they carry intercultural meanings, associations, or connotations in durable and tangible ways – as is, for instance, the case with the ‘Mother of Humanity® sculpture in Los Angeles (USA), the Way of Human Rights in Nuremberg (Germany), and the Monument to Multiculturalism in Toronto (Canada)’ (Pöllmann, 2013, p. 1) – can be conceived as objectifications of intercultural capital. Examples of institutionalized intercultural capital include officially issued and recognized guidelines, curricula, and academic titles with a more or less explicit intercultural outlook.

Importantly, while the notion of cultural capital, on the one hand, and the notion of intercultural capital, on the other, are associated with distinct and distinguishable universes of empirical indicators, in ontological terms they always remain intimately interrelated. To quote from an earlier contribution to the conceptualization of intercultural capital:

Even if the inter in intercultural capital emphasizes the sphere of relationships and relationalities between (different) cultures, it deliberately does so without neglecting “cultural particularities”. In fact, all forms of intercultural capital are also forms of cultural capital in that they are particular to the cultures in relation to and through which they have emerged. And all forms of cultural capital are also forms of intercultural capital given that the cultures in relation to and through which they have emerged constitute, to a greater or lesser extent, a product of intercultural contact and “mixing”. (Pöllmann, 2013, p. 2)

Notwithstanding their intrinsic ontological interrelatedness, in contrast to cultural capital – which according to Bourdieu (1984) ‘only exists and only produces its effects in the field in which it is produced and reproduced’ (p. 113) – intercultural capital ‘functions as a potent marker of sociocultural distinction within a wider range of contexts of (re)production and is likely to retain, or indeed enhance, its exchange value when “moved” across more distant fields’ (Pöllmann, 2013, p. 2).

People can realize intercultural capital – as well as all other forms of cultural capital – ‘in terms of (a
combination of) awareness, acquisition, and application’ (Pollmann, 2013, p. 2). The respective processes of acquisition and application may be rather conscious or unconscious, ‘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’ (Pollmann, 2016, p. 5). No less important than these different modes of acquisition/application are the specific contexts of acquisition/application and the particular contents of acquisition/application. When attempting to assess the relative chances of intercultural capital realization, it matters a great deal what kind of and whose intercultural capital is being officially recognized and valued, by whom, and under which circumstances.

In an age of intensified inter- and transnational communication, travel, and trade, there is good reason to believe that the realization of intercultural capital is likely to benefit students at college or university (Jones, 2016; Killick, 2017) as well as students and pupils in pre-tertiary and basic education (Boivin, 2016; Kamada, 2013; Pham & Tran, 2015). Other educational and non-educational areas in which a beneficiary impact of intercultural capital realizations might plausibly be expected include, but are not limited to teacher education (Goldstein, 2007; Pollmann, 2018), lifelong language learning (Coffey 2018), collaborative online language learning (Lawrence 2013), STEM scholar success (Chapman 2018), tourism (Ferreira Carvalho, et al. 2018), transmigrant families (González Barea et al. 2010), neighborhood politics (Filep 2016), social work (Delgado 2014), and inclusive forms of intercultural dialogue more generally (Leeds-Hurwitz 2015).

However, as straightforwardly beneficial as the realization of intercultural capital might appear in some intercultural constellations or encounters, as complicated and conflictive it can be in others. To restate a well-documented empirical fact, ‘intergroup contact in and by itself does not always and necessarily occur in, or lead to, harmonious intergroup relations’ (Pollmann, 2013, p. 3). The (often violent) insurgences of contemporary Latin America’s indigenous populations against their post- and neocolonial marginalization constitute concrete cases in point – be it the Mapuche in Chile (Jaimovich et al. 2018), the Ava Guarani in Argentina (Swampa & Pandolfi, 2004), the Zenú in Colombia (Solano Suarez, 2011) or, perhaps the most globally recognized, the Zapatista movement in Mexico (Forbis, 2016; Rico Montoya, 2016). Notwithstanding their relative idiosyncratic uniqueness, the respective struggles all reveal a panorama of multicultural states which are characterized by an unadorned lack of equitable intercultural dialogue and sociocultural justice.

In multicultural societies around the world, too many schools, colleges, and universities ignore or underrate the (inter)cultural resources of socioculturally marginalized pupils and students, or worse, construe them as deficits and obstacles to individual or collective academic progress. It matters, for example, a great deal whether indigenous students’ (inter)cultural heritage is recognized and valued in its own right by mainstream systems of formal education (Pollmann, 2017). In a similar vein, but concerning the symbolic power of objectified (inter)cultural capital, there is a substantial difference between uncritically or even proudly exhibiting a monument that unequivocally evokes ideas of ‘national superiority’ or ‘colonial domination’ on the one hand, and refraining from such forms of aggression or even opting to display a monument with intercultural connotations, on the other.

Considering the wealth of different and differently appreciated (inter)cultural forms, and consistent with Bourdieu’s theoretical and methodological pragmatism (Wacquant, 1992, p. 15 – p. 19 and p. 26 – p. 35), the notion of intercultural capital realization in terms of awareness, acquisition, and application is neither derived from, nor does it allude to, unyielding monistic assumptions. Quite to the contrary, and as will be emphasized in the concluding section, it constitutes a flexible conceptual tool that may guide or inform both quantitative and qualitative investigations into intercultural transformations at the levels of embodiment, objectification, and institutionalization. Prior to attending to the respective research-related issues, it is necessary to extend our conceptual discussion by taking a critical look at the actual or alleged transformative potential of cross-cultural mobility.

Cross-cultural mobility as transformational opportunity?

There is a plethora of research pertaining to the crossing of actual or alleged ‘cultural borders’ – from models of quasi-inevitable sequential intercultural development (Bennett, 1986, 1993; Hammer, 2011) to
theorizations of specific stages of ‘culture shock’ (Oberg, 1960; Pedersen, 1995). The crucial problem with such developmental approaches lies not only in their (normatively tainted) ideas of teleologically oriented progress, but also in their (often implicit) initial conceptual conflation of ‘the cultural’ with ‘the national’.

Although cross-cultural mobility may coincide to a greater or lesser extent with cross-national mobility, it should not be confused or exclusively linked to the latter. As a matter of empirical fact, and in accordance with the Bourdieusian conceptual framework put forward in the present article, people can be cross-culturally mobile without crossing any national border or boundary. Even within the confines of the nation-state most closely familiar to them, they can perfectly well find themselves surrounded by previously unknown or unnoticed patterns of inter-individual habitus overlaps and novel clusters of (inter)cultural capital.

As Neriko Musha Doerr (2019) illustrates in her recent contribution to the programmatic and practical transformation of study abroad programs, the educational opportunities which arise from engagement with migrants and ethnic minority students at home are greatly underexplored, ignored, or negatively contrasted with processes of immersion in other countries. Equally noteworthy in this context are her reflections on the commercial interests behind promotions of international study and living experiences and how these tend to build on essentializing notions of cultural homogeneity, while (re)producing idealized portraits of the respective ‘host societies’, ‘host families’, and ‘native speakers’.

Doerr’s important work suggests at least two answers to the question as to why so many study abroad programs tell us so little about intercultural transformations: on the one hand, due to a genuine lack of interest in such matters and, on the other hand, because of a failure to turn sincerely pursued transformational goals into the corresponding outcomes. In the latter case, the respective educational coordinators would be well-advised to ask themselves why some types of cross-cultural mobility seem to be more likely to concur with intercultural transformations than others, rather than simply taking intercultural transformations in the course of study abroad programs for granted. After all, good educational intentions alone are barely sufficient, as Paul Gorski (2008) so persuasively demonstrates in his plea for the decolonization of the often well-meaning, but ultimately at best paternalizing ‘intercultural’ educational practices of culturally dominant agents or institutions.

Bourdieu’s field theory is particularly relevant for evaluations of (educational) policies and programs concerned with achieving ‘the kind of habitus dislocations through cross-cultural mobility that are likely to stimulate the development of students’ intercultural reflexivity and practical intercultural sense’ (Pollmann, 2016, p. 9). This said – and acknowledging that ‘an invitation to think with Bourdieu is of necessity an invitation to think beyond Bourdieu, and against him whenever required’ (Wacquant, 1992, p. xiv) – a more inclusive rereading of classical Bourdieusian field theory would ‘place more emphasis on people as both positioned within pertinent fields and their acting and interacting elements’ (Pollmann, 2016, p. 5) whose individual habitus may be faced with moments of dislocation and crisis.

Indeed, a central reason for why individual cross-cultural mobility does not necessarily imply intercultural transformations is likely to lie in a lack of habitus-troubling dislocations – as is, for instance, the case in study abroad programs in which students who are favorably positioned within one national context temporarily move to another national context where their respective capital resources are recognized and valued in quasi-identical or at least comparable ways. Moreover, the respective programs frequently offer a whole range of well-intended remedies to address any potentially arising experiences of ‘culture shock’ – thus further reducing the likelihood of potentially transformational habitus crises.

As the work of more recent academic contributors suggests, ‘culture shock’ can and should be seen as a transformational opportunity rather than associated with personal deficits, shortcomings or other misfortunes that allegedly require some kind of psychological treatment or cure (Zhou et al., 2008). In a similar vein, but within the logic of the present Bourdieusian approach, cross-cultural mobilities are considered to be most productive in achieving their transformational potential precisely when they entail habitus-troubling experiences of intercultural capital realization.

(Dis)comforting intercultural capital realizations
The realization of intercultural capital can involve different contents, modes, and contexts of acquisition and application of which different individuals or groups may be more or less aware of and which may transform themselves and their surroundings in different ways. In contrast to teleological models of intercultural development, the notion of intercultural transformation proposed here does not allude to any kind of sequential progress towards certain predefined ends. Accordingly, previously existing clusters of embodied, objectified, and institutionalized (inter)cultural capital are conceived as being supplemented or reconfigured rather than replaced in the course of more or less (dis)comforting processes of intercultural capital realization.

Within the logic of the present Bourdieusian approach, comforting intercultural capital realizations imply: recognizing and valuing a wide range of embodiments, objectifications, and institutionalizations; appreciating notions of ‘cultural difference’ when freely and peacefully asserted by the respective individual or group, without negatively impacting on other individuals or groups. In contrast, discomforting intercultural capital realizations are considered to imply: (self)critically scrutinizing intercultural relations in terms of their actual or potential involvement with any form of racism, (neo)colonialism or essentialism; rejecting hierarchical constructions of ‘cultural difference’ and the associated (racist) stereotypes and prejudices, while recognizing their negative impact in terms of marginalization, discrimination, and other forms of systematic disadvantage; questioning the taken-for-grantedness of officialized and officially institutionalized embodiments and objectifications.

In addition to the above-mentioned points, it is important to note that discomforting intercultural capital realizations promise a greater transformational impact when directed at the more comfortably-positioned, while comforting intercultural capital realizations promise a greater transformational impact when addressing the less comfortably-positioned. In other words, in field conditions which are characterized by unequal distributions of individually embodied capital resources which, in turn, are inequitably recognized and valued at the levels of objectification and institutionalization, even well-intended attempts at treating everybody equal can be expected to constrain rather than enable processes of intercultural transformation.

As previously stated, the idea of (dis)comforting intercultural capital realizations implies different contents, modes, and contexts of acquisition and application, which differ from rigidly sequential and teleological models of intercultural development. In doing so, it aims to sustain ‘critically approaches to the study of sociocultural inequalities and the (re)production of privilege, (symbolic) power, and (symbolic) forms of domination’ (Pollmann, 2016, p. 6). In the end, however, any sound and convincing evaluation of the possibly (dis)comforting nature and potentially transformative impact of intercultural capital realizations will need to be based on systematic empirical inquiry.

Outlook: empirical research on intercultural transformations

The notion of intercultural capital can play a vital part in the empirical-analytical quest toward a better understanding of intercultural transformations – both as a definitive concept and a sensitizing concept – whereby, to quote Blumer’s (1954) timeless definition:

A definitive concept refers precisely to what is common to a class of objects, by the aid of a clear definition in terms of attributes or fixed bench marks. [. . .] A sensitizing concept lacks such specification of attributes or bench marks and consequently it does not enable the user to move directly to the instance and its relevant content. Instead, it gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look. (p. 7)

While quantitatively oriented inquiries are likely to employ the notion of intercultural capital as a definitive concept, qualitatively oriented inquiries will tend to use it as a sensitizing concept. Whether the choice of
one approach or the other, or a combination of both, be considered as methodologically more or less adequate ultimately depends on the specific problem under investigation, as the following selection of possible research questions shall illustrate:

Which forms of embodied, objectified, and institutionalized intercultural capital exist at different points in time within particular institutional, field-specific, and geopolitical contexts of acquisition and application?

How diverse are the respective intercultural capital embodiments, objectifications, and institutionalizations in terms of different contents (e.g., language skills, experiences with culturally diverse environments, or intercultural friendships) and modes (e.g., comforting/discomforting, mediated/unmediated, conscious/unconscious, reflexive/intuitive or harmonious/confictive) of acquisition and application?

How and to what extent might habitus-troubling experiences of ‘culture shock’ be linked to transformational processes of intercultural capital realization at the levels of embodiment, objectification, and institutionalization?

How can formal, informal, and nonformal education stimulate discomforting intercultural moments for the comparatively comfortably positioned, while providing comforting opportunities for intercultural capital realization for the comparatively uncomfortably positioned?

In one way or the other, answers to the above-listed research questions will need to entail the quantitative ‘measurement’ or qualitative interpretation of the nature, composition, and relative salience of different (clusters of) embodied, objectified, and institutionalized forms of (inter)cultural capital at different states of realization in terms of awareness, acquisition and application and at different points in time.

It is worth recalling – and indeed of central conceptual and empirical-analytical importance – that the notion of intercultural transformation proposed here implies the reconfiguration or diversification rather than substitution of existing clusters of embodied, objectified, and institutionalized (inter)cultural capital in the course of more or less (dis)comforting processes of intercultural capital realization. In deliberately setting itself apart from (normatively tainted) teleological models of some kind of sequentially progressive intercultural development, the present approach thrives to do justice to the inherent complexity and (more or less complementary) diversification of (inter)cultural forms and transformations at the levels of embodiment, objectification, and institutionalization.

Whether put to work in the spirit of a definitive or sensitizing concept, the notion of intercultural capital is intended to form part of context-sensitive and ‘problem-oriented research strategies rather than rigid theoretical frameworks and methodological fetishisms’ (Pollmann, 2013, p. 5). Not despite but because of the need to overcome the pitfalls of both cognitive reductionism and cultural essentialism, there remains a socioculturally relevant, epistemologically sound, and ontologically legitimate interest in the (longitudinally-comparative) empirical investigation of intercultural transformations at the nexus of different and differentially realized cultural forms.

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