

Habitus and Field

EUNICE GAERLAN-PRICE

Field

describes the social spaces within which humans move, socialise, and position themselves; fields encompass power relations that determine the structure of social positions within it.

Habitus refers to the socially acquired or acculturated norms, dispo-

***Dr. Eunice Gaerlan-Price** (she/her) is a Filipinx lecturer, researcher and Head of the Master of Teaching and Learning programme in the School of Education at the Auckland University of Technology. Her research interests include girlhood, gender and education, social media, critical pedagogies, sociology, and critical theory. Her current research focuses on sociological understandings of success, particularly as they pertain to girls, identity and social media.*

States of play: High schools, social fields, and the habitus

Dylan hated her first few months at a new school. Her family moved around a lot so she was well accustomed to the “new kid, new school” vibe. She was used

to the awkwardness of trying to work out how things rolled, but it never got easier. In fact, the older she got, the harder it was. Walking nervously through the hallway of Rangeview High as a new student in her senior year, Dylan thought, “You think every school would be the same as they seemed to have the same cliques, same cafeteria layout, same syllabus—but no. Every school has its own code; an unwritten set of rules in a game that you don’t quite know unless you’ve been playing it for some time. The trick is working out the game and the rules, and playing it well. That is, of course, if you want to play it.” The first month was make or break for Dylan. She knew after one month whether she’d worked out the state of play and was destined for a year of ease or whether she’d be counting down the days until her family moved away again.

sitions, values, conditioning, and capital ingrained in social structures, which become embodied by the individuals from within those social structures.

Play 1: What's in a name?

Dylan shouldn’t really count her name as being the first play because she had no control over it, but it was. She could tell that if the school was full of Beths, Graces, Simons, and Marks, she might as well set herself up in the corner of every room and learn to love her own company. Schools with Beths, Graces, Simons, and Marks would question her choice of name (as if it were her choice) and deem her an [other](#) because she was “a girl with a boy’s name.” She’d had the joy of attending a couple of

schools where the response was, “your name’s Dylan? Cool.” Sure enough, she’d won that play in those schools. But what about Rangeview High? She knew what had to happen. The hallway walk invariably led her to her locker and it would be at her locker that she’d make eye contact with the students congregating close by. She’d flash a friendly smile. Usually, the smile would be reciprocated with some hesitancy but it would be polite enough. Dylan would eek out a mild “hi” to which there would be an equally mild but still polite response. There would be an eyeing up and down of her attire. And then one girl (the one with the most social power) would speak for the group and say, “Hi. You’re new here. I’m What’s your name?” This play was predictable.

“Hi. You’re new here. I’m Beth.” (Great, thought Dylan. I know where this is going). “What’s your name?”

“Hi, I’m Dylan.”

“Dylan? Isn’t that a boy’s name? Shall we just call you Dee?” And before Dylan had time to respond, the group walked off.

Rangeview 1, Dylan O.

Play 2: Mastering the academic game

Dylan made her way to Period 1, Math, her favourite subject. She had arrived slightly late as she worked out the geography of the school, and ended up in the last remaining seat in the front row alongside some eager boys. Glancing behind her, she noticed most of the girls sat towards the rear of the classroom. This gender segregation seemed strange to her. In other schools, classroom seating in the mathematics classroom was far more integrated. As the class progressed, she demonstrated

her aptitude and enjoyment for the subject. She forgot her usual first-day hesitancy when it came to math. The subject excited her. She jostled for attention with the boys in the front row who were eager to the point of disruptive. They would call out, debate, argue with the teacher, argue with each other. Dylan loved it. It was dynamic and exciting—just as math should be! But she noticed very quickly that she was the only girl who showed any such excitement. She noticed the boys would talk over her, or they would disregard her ideas. She noticed the girls were far more reticent, often rolling their eyes when Dylan would call out her responses to problems. She observed how the teacher would request her to put her hand up but wouldn't offer the same correction to some of her more rambunctious male peers. Over time, slowly but surely, she found herself shrinking back in class, not wanting to rock the boat, not wanting to get off-side with her teacher or the other students. Slowly but surely, she found herself habituating to the expectations placed on her.

Rangeview 2, Dylan O.

Play 3: Social media

Coming to the end of her first month, an important play was the social game on social media. Dylan found herself drawn to a visual world of comparison and 'best selves.' She was happy to have her Facebook friend requests accepted by the girls in her year. It made her privy to their perfect little lives. She pored over their photos, status updates, and posts. She commented on their pages, with no response. She began to Like what they liked and shared similar posts with the hope that they would recognise her as one of them. She tried to shed the eager academic maths-geek label she was now assigned. She privileged their

tastes over her own. The more she did this, the more she felt like a stranger in her own skin. There was such a dissonance between the real Dylan, the Rangeview High Dylan, and the Dylan she found herself being online. Her tastes, her strengths, her identity... these just didn't seem to hold any currency in her world at this new school.

Rangeview 3, Dylan O.

Game over.

Discussion Questions

- How would you describe the *field* at Rangeview High?
- How would you describe *habitus* based on Dylan's social negotiations at Rangeview High?
- What clues might Play 1 offer about the social power inherent in names and labels?
- What clues might Play 2 offer about the expectations around intelligence and success at Rangeview High, and how does this affect Dylan's *habitus*?
- How do names and labels help to establish and maintain social power?
- Unlike individual high schools, social media creates connections with other intersecting fields. How might these intersections and connections enhance and strengthen the power of social media?
- How might you conceptualise or understand social media in terms of field and *habitus*?
- Have you ever moved schools? What did it feel like? Were

you aware of the difference in your habitus versus the habitus of most of the other students? What helped you?

Exercises

Watch [this excerpt from the movie “Mean Girls”](#) and consider field and habitus within the context of Cady’s move to this new school.

Then, using [the film’s script, written by Tina Fey](#), present/act out relevant scenes from the film that showcase the notions of field and habitus. Discuss how it feels to embody habitus within the context of this movie.

Additional Resources

[Bourdieu, P. \(1977\). *Outline of a theory of practice* \(R. Nice, trans.\). Cambridge University Press. \(Original work published 1972\)](#)

[Bourdieu, P. \(1990\). *The logic of practice* \(R. Nice, trans.\). Polity Press. \(Original work published 1980\)](#)

Gaerlan-Price, E., Wardman, J., & Bruce, T. (2021). Welcome to the table: A Bourdieusian take on gifted New Zealand young women. *Education Sciences*, 11, 106.

[Grenfell, M. \(2012\) *Pierre Bourdieu: Key concepts*. Routledge.](#)

Jenkins, R. (2002). [*Pierre Bourdieu*\(P. Hamilton, Ed.\). Routledge.](#)