

2 Bourdieu's Theory of Practice as Theoretical Framework

Having introduced our research project, this chapter serves to build up the theoretical foundation of our study. In a first step, we will introduce the main elements of Bourdieu's Theory of Practice as our theoretical framework. Subsequently, we will apply these elements to an international career context whereupon we will lead a critical discussion and demonstrate the rationale for our choice of the theoretical framework.

2.1 Bourdieu's Reconciliation of Structure and Agency

Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) was a French sociologist and philosopher whose research “left an indelible mark on the field of educational and cultural sociology” (Özbilgin & Tatli, 2005, p. 855)¹, especially outside the French territory (Golsorkhi & Huault, 2006). His major work, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* (1972) (Outline of a Theory of Practice) resulted from his research about Kabyle peoples in Algeria (1958, 1963, 1964). Bourdieu interpreted the society in terms of domination and relative strength that, as he argues, is mainly the result of unequal allocation of resources within the society (e.g. Weiß, 2006).

Bourdieu's Theory of Practice can be classified as a Grand Theory² (e.g. Reckwitz, 2003). A Grand Theory is an “abstract and normative theory of human nature and conduct” (Skinner, 1985, p.1) that is generic in nature and that can be applied to different circumstances and areas of research. In this respect, Bourdieu's Theory of Practice has for instance been used as theoretical framework in Organizational Studies (see e.g. Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), Marketing (see e.g. Holt, 1998) or Human Resource Management (e.g. Mayrhofer, Meyer, Steyrer, & Langer, 2007), to name only some fields of application. One of Bourdieu's most important and also criticized contributions (Hillebrandt, 1999) that is also expressed in our entry-quote (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) is the reconciliation of the dualism(s) of structure vs. agency, structuralism vs. constructivism, determinism vs. freedom or macro vs. micro (Bourdieu, 1972). Social structures, e.g. the international market, have indeed been central in sociological theory (Berard, 2005). They are used to “highlight those patterns of social life that are not reducible to individuals and that are durable enough to withstand the whims of individuals who would change them” (Hays, 1994, p. 60f.). Structures act as rules and determine and condition individuals' thoughts and behaviors. A pure structuralist perspective would imply that people ‘behave’ as robots that are programmed to act in accordance with the structured patterns, a perspective that appears obviously too rigid. On the other hand, the voluntarism or agency perspective rather suggests that individuals are completely free in their choices and always have an array of alternatives (Hays, 1994). In his Theory of Practice, Bourdieu attempts to overcome these dualities. He explains strategy or practice by the complex interplay of his main concepts, namely field, habitus and capital. The following

¹ When doing his research in a boxing gym in Chicago, Wacquant (2011) introduced Pierre Bourdieu as Mike Tyson of sociology.

² We here refer to the term ‘Grand Theory’ in a positive way.

sections will serve us to present the basic ideas of Bourdieu's Theory of Practice and to explain how he attempts to reconcile the structure-agency problematic.

2.2 Major Elements of Bourdieu's Theory of Practice

As Hermann (2004) or Golsorkhi and Huault (2006) put it, Bourdieu's Theory of Practice does not constitute a cohesive theory within itself, but rather represents a flexible theoretical approach whose main elements must never be considered detached from each other. This makes it almost impossible to explain one element of Bourdieu's Theory without referring to the others.

2.2.1 The Field as Relatively Autonomous Microcosm

The daily life of social agents is determined by an infinite amount of interactions, e.g. discussions, negotiations or conflicts. In order to grasp these interactions, it is important to first understand the circumstances and the place where these are produced (Accardo, 2006). In other words, interactions have to be considered in their respective *social space* (*espace social*) that is subdivided into different *social fields* (*champs sociaux*; Bourdieu, 1966 in reference to the intellectual field) serving as arena of practice (Chudzikowski & Mayrhofer, 2011). *Social fields* are the macro concept that structure Bourdieu's thoughts and that represent the entry point for Bourdieu's further concepts (Golsorkhi & Huault, 2006).

Social fields are based on "an historically generated system of shared meaning" (Iellatchitch et al., 2003, p. 732). Different social fields can be distinguished, e.g. the field of art, literature, science or careers that can be further subdivided into subfields, e.g. biological research or management research for the field of science. Of specific pertinence in our Franco-German research will be the German and French *career fields*. Bourdieu (1997) understands these social fields as universe or microcosm in which the *agents* and institutions are integrated and interact with each other in accordance with field-specific *rules* (*règles*), which is why the *field* represents the more structural part of Bourdieu's theory. Rules are not formalized but rather tacit in nature (Wacquant, 2011) and need to be internalized by the *agents* in order to demonstrate appropriate *practices* and *strategies* (*le sens du placement et du jeu*; Bourdieu, 1983a). The internalization of the field-specific rules enables the agent to anticipate future tendencies and opportunities, which Bourdieu compares to a good rugby player who anticipates where the ball will fall down and who will therefore already be where the ball falls down before the ball falls down (Bourdieu, 1983a). There is no global rule that applies to all fields. The respective rules and conditions on a social field have to be found out by empirical research (Hillebrandt, 1999). Therefore, Bourdieu (1966) argues that due to their unique rules, fields are autonomous. However, he also qualifies that the autonomy is only relative as fields are embedded in a social space. For instance, the intellectual field may also be influenced by the politic, the economy or religion.

A *social field* is a “locus of struggles” (Bourdieu, 1975, p. 19) that represents a network of positions (Bourdieu, 1972). Boundaries of social fields are where their respective effect ends, i.e. where the stakes of the game lose their impact (Mayrhofer, Meyer, Iellatchitch, & Schiffinger, 2004) and where the effects of another field begin. According to Iellatchitch et al. (2003), these are not pre-defined and have to be found out empirically. Battles between agents are principally about relative positions within the field, i.e. maximizing *capital*, wherefore individual *strategies* in conformity with the rules of the game are of necessity (Iellatchitch et al., 2003). It is the structure of objective relations (*la structure des relations objectives*) between the agents on a field that defines dominant and dominated positions (Bourdieu, 1997) and that determines what agents can and what they cannot do, i.e. which *practices* are possible and which not. Put another way, the position an agent occupies on a field creates self-evident rules that determine his potential cruising radius, i.e. the limits of social mobility within a social field (*doxa*; Bourdieu, 1972). This *doxa* forms the sense of our place and the feeling of what is possible and what not. In this respect, Accardo (2006) cited the example of the ladies from the British aristocracy who would never have even thought about seducing their gamekeeper (and vice-versa) as the ladies and gamekeepers belong to different social classes (*classes sociales*) who occupy different positions on the social field.

In summary, *fields* are places of power relations where *practices* of *agents* are not arbitrary. Once it has been understood that all interactions are anchored in a specific social field, it now has to be examined how positions on the respective fields are gained.

2.2.2 Capital as Principal Cause for Distinction

Taking as a basis that a social field represents the playground where certain rules apply (Bourdieu, 1972), agents need to be endowed with a specific quantity and structure of resources they can put at stake in order to obtain the right to enter a *social field* (*droit d'entrée*; *entry price*) (Accardo, 2006). Each field values particular sorts of resources (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) that Bourdieu named *capital*. Criticizing the homologous tradition of human capitalists (e.g. Becker, 1964), Bourdieu distinguishes between four types of capital, namely *economic*, *cultural*, *social* and *symbolic capital* (Bourdieu, 1986), which agents mobilize in order to enter and move on social fields. Although all types of capital appear to be distinct, in reality, they are very closely linked to each other and can be converted (Accardo, 2006). In this respect, one type of capital serves as currency (*monnaie*) to be exchanged against others (Bourdieu, 1986), which assumes the existence of a market for capitals (*état de marché*).

Economic capital (*capital économique*) is related to a person's fortune and revenues. It is directly convertible into money and can be institutionalized in property rights (Bourdieu, 1986). This form of capital can be more easily transformed into other types of capital than vice-versa (Postone, LiPuma, & Calhoun, 1993), e.g. when buying a book and thereby exchanging *economic* against (objectivized) *cultural capital*.

Cultural capital (*capital culturel*) is especially transferred by family and education and may be institutionalized in the forms of educational qualifications. Cultural capital is the primary cause for status and relative positions within a social field. It can exist in three forms. In the incorporated (or embodied) state (*forme incorporée*), the cultural capital is a durable system of dispositions and represents one's entirety of intellectual qualifications or human capital (Bourdieu, 1986 citing Becker, 1964; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1985) and one's culture or cultivation that presupposes a process of embodiment as it implies a time-intensive labor of inculcation and assimilation (Bourdieu, 1983b). Hence, the acquisition of incorporated cultural capital cannot be delegated. The work of acquisition is the work of oneself. The objectivized form (*forme objective*) of cultural capital exists in the form of material objects, e.g. books, paintings, monuments, instruments etc. that are transferable in their physical state. Finally, in the institutionalized form (*forme institutionnalisée*), cultural capital takes the form of a certificate of cultural competence, e.g. a formalized academic qualification (diploma) that is socially sanctioned by an institution. According to Bourdieu (1986), institutions institute cultural capital by a collective magic and enable a comparison of qualification holders, e.g. two persons having obtained their diploma from different institutions.

Bourdieu's social capital (*capital social*) represents a person's entirety of social relations. It is one's network of actual or potential resources that can be legitimized by the family, group or class membership (Bourdieu, 1986) and that allow access to material and immaterial resources, information and knowledge (Gretzinger, Hinz, & Matiaske, 2010). Social capital can be institutionalized in a title of nobility and requires efforts for its creation and maintain, e.g. by reciprocal invitations (Bonnewitz, 2005).

Lastly, the notion of symbolic capital (*capital symbolique*) is related to honor and recognition. It is not an independent type of capital within itself, but rather consists in the acknowledgment of capital by the entirety of the peer competitors on a specific field (Bourdieu, 1997). Thus, on a social field, economic, social and cultural capital is converted to symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1972) that is "worthy of being pursued and preserved" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 182). The process of recognition of symbolic capital reflects the system's assumption about the usefulness of capital, thus depending on the rules of the field. Symbolic capital reflects the external and internal recognition, i.e. the value accorded by the system and its actors (Doherty & Dickmann, 2009). As Sartre (1948, p. 98 cited in Bourdieu, 1966, p. 873) argues: "There are certain qualities that emerge only through the judgment of a somebody else"³. Figure 2 summarizes Bourdieu's different types of capital.

³ Own translation from French.

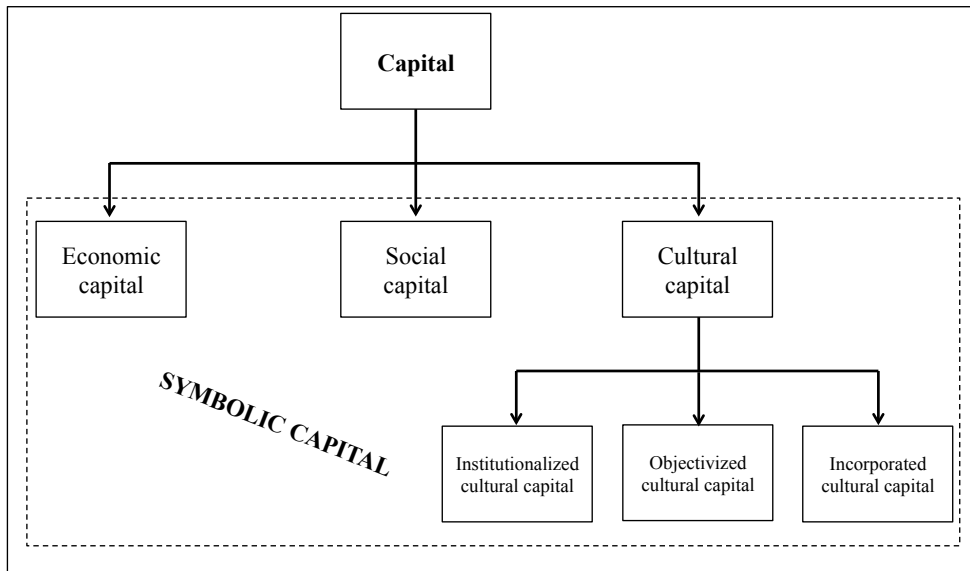


Figure 2. Bourdieu's types of capital (on the basis of Bourdieu, 1972; Hermann, 2004).

Besides the right to enter a social field, the capital structure also determines an agent's position on the field or social space in general. Bourdieu insists on the fact that positions on social fields are relative. They are determined by the volume and structure of the agent's capital portfolio that is compared to that of other agents on the same field, especially regarding economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In *La distinction. Critique sociale du jugement*, Bourdieu (1984) comes to a hierarchization of the social space in dominant and dominated class fractions (*classes dominantes ou supérieures et classes dominées*) using two dimensions (see figure 3). The vertical axis shows the absolute amount of economic and cultural capital, which is said to be the most determinant criterion for class distinction. In this respect, the dominant class with a high amount of capital (e.g. high level managers or professors) can be distinguished from the dominated class with a low amount of economic and cultural capital (e.g. unskilled workers or farmers). A further distinction can be made based on the capital structure shown on the horizontal axis. On a similar horizontal level, this relative amount of capital allows to oppose those agents where the cultural capital is dominant (e.g. professors) to agents where the economic capital is dominant (e.g. high level managers) in their respective portfolio (Bonnewitz, 2005).

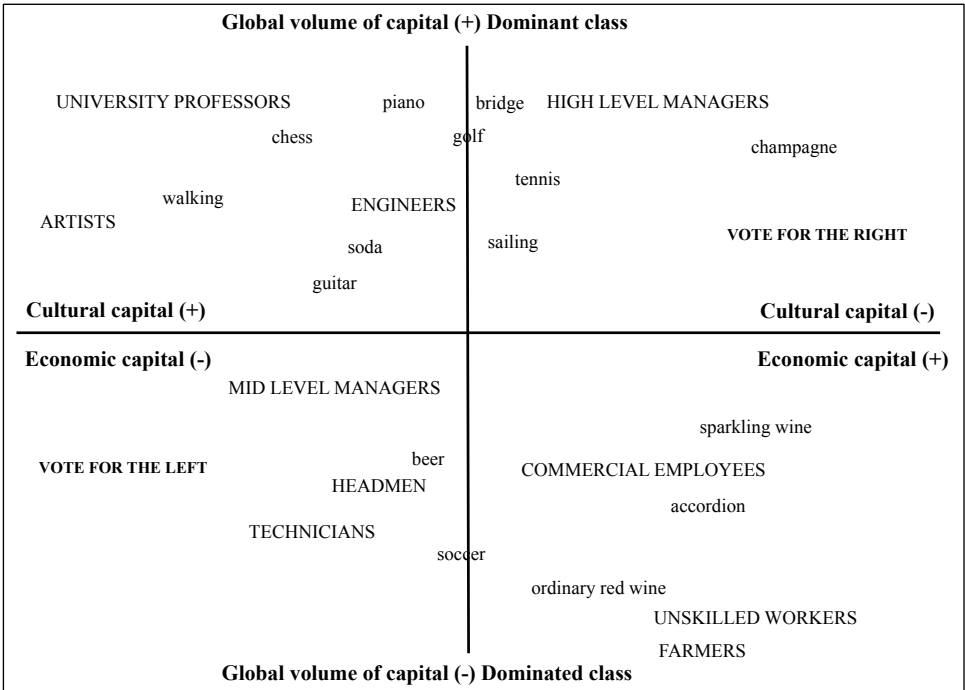


Figure 3. Bourdieu's field structure (on the basis of Bourdieu, 1984; Bonnewitz 2005).

In order to distinguish the elite of the dominant from the mass of the dominated, Bourdieu (1984) uses pairs of antagonistic adjectives, e.g. *spiritual* versus *material*, *fine* versus *coarse*, *light* versus *heavy*, *free* versus *forced*, *broad* versus *narrow*, *unique* versus *common* or *brilliant* versus *dull*. The agent’s position on the social field determines their language (*langue*; Bourdieu, 1982), lifestyle (*style de vie*) and particularly their tastes (*goûts*), e.g. for food, drinks, sports or also their political orientation (see figure 3), which is strongly mediated by their respective *habitus* (Bourdieu & Darbel, 1969; Veenstra, 2007). In this respect, unskilled workers who are members of the dominated class and who have a low amount of *economic capital* will tend to have a rather functional approach to food that has to be nutrimental in the first instance, whereas high level managers who have a rather high amount of *economic capital* will more likely have an affinity for delicatessen and will accord more importance to the taste than to nutrimental characteristics. For the same reason, members of the dominant class will tend to drink champagne rather than ordinary red wine or play golf rather than soccer (Bourdieu, 1984).

2.2.3 Habitus as Psychosomatic Mind

The Habitus (*habitus*) is the central concept in Bourdieu’s sociology (Bonnewitz, 2005). It must not be mistaken for the common notion of *habit* as a mechanical adoption of a previously determined program as Bourdieu rather emphasizes the active role of the social agent in the construction of the social reality (Strand, 2001). By *habitus*, Bourdieu understands the “ensemble of schemata of perception, thinking, feeling, evaluating, speaking

and acting that structures all expressive, verbal, and practical manifestations and utterances of a person", similar to the grammar in the language (Krais, 1988, 1993, p.169). It is the system of dispositions as a product of history that "produces practices in accordance with the schemes engendered by history" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 82). The habitus is durable but evolving and is continually adjusted to the current context and reinforced by further experience (Mayrhofer et al., 2007). It "illuminates the variegated logics of social action" (Wacquant, 2011, p. 82). At the core of Bourdieu's *habitus* lies the tendency to always act the same way in similar situations. Therefore, habitus can be understood as a kind of psychosomatic mind (Rehbein, 2011).

The habitus is acquired during primary and secondary socialization (Bonnewitz, 2005). Primary socialization is the socialization that comes from the family during childhood. The resulting *primary habitus* (*habitus primaire*) is rather stable. The schemes of action and perception that have been transferred during childhood are an education that is linked to the parents' social position in the social space. Therefore, the primary habitus is about 'internalizing the external' as the parents' modes of thinking, feeling and behaving that are linked to their position in the social space are internalized in the children's own habitus. This is what Bourdieu (1977) also calls *class habitus* (*habitus de classe*) that reflects the different positions people have in society and that leads to different lifestyles tastes and interests among social classes (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Darbel, 1969). The *secondary habitus* (*habitus secondaire*) is built on the primary habitus and especially results from one's education at school and university, but also from other life experiences. The primary habitus as "embodied history, internalized as second nature and so forgotten as history" (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 56) never loses its impact and always influences the development of the secondary habitus. In this respect, the primary and secondary habitus can also be summarized into one single habitus that is constantly reinforced and modified by life experiences giving it a dynamic quality (Chudzickowski & Mayrhofer, 2011). As the product of our past and present experiences, the habitus seems to be a never-ending restructuring internal structure (Bonnewitz, 2005). However, this does not imply that our system of dispositions changes at any new life event. Indeed, Bourdieu believes the habitus to be rather inertial (Chudzickowski & Mayrhofer, 2011) or "durable, but not eternal" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 133), which can sometimes lead to the fact that the *habitus* is not adapted to modified *field* conditions, which Bourdieu (1977) calls the *hysteresis effect*. A famous example is the generation conflict where the *habitus* of *agents* has been developed at different points in time leading to different understandings of which practice is 'reasonable' for one generation versus 'scandalous' or 'unthinkable' for the other generation.

According to Bourdieu (1977, p. 72), habitus is "the strategy generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations". Therefore, the habitus is said to guide our *strategy* (*stratégie*), i.e. the unconscious *practice* (*pratique*) that aims at achieving our objectives (Rehbein, 2011) by investing the appropriate types and amounts of capitals on a social field. Bourdieu's habitus is strongly connected to the field (Bourdieu, 1972). The class habitus that stems from our position on the social field leads to the *doxa*, i.e. the knowledge of what is taken for granted on a field that sets social boundaries and limits our social behavior. In this respect, the habitus limits practices and strategies and "entertains with

the social world” by ensuring that we act “intentionally without intention” (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 12) in conformity with our relative position on the field. Furthermore, the habitus ensures that agents act in accordance with the field specific rules as all agents tacitly recognize “the value of the stakes of the game and the practical mastery of its rules” (*illusio*; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 117). This also ensures that agents are competitors for positions within the field as they pursue the same objective in the game. Bourdieu (1984, p. 101) expresses the interplay between field, capital and habitus by the following equation:

$$[(\text{habitus}) (\text{capital}) + \text{field}] = \text{practice}.$$

Bourdieu (1972) stresses the dialectic relationship between structure and agency that is manifested in the habitus. He understands habitus as structured structures (*structures structurées*) that are predisposed to act as structuring structures (*structures structurantes*). On the one hand, the habitus is the result of social structures, more precisely of the social class (*doxa*) and the rules of the game on the field that have been internalized (*illusio*). On the other hand, the habitus also structures practices and reproduces social fields (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000) since individual strategies and practices as products of positions and rules inevitably assure the economic and social conditions for reproduction. As Accardo (2006, p. 208) puts it, “by serving oneself, one inevitably serves and by serving, one inevitably serves oneself”⁴. By acting in conformity with the structure, the structure is confirmed and reproduced. In *La noblesse d'état. Grandes Ecoles et esprits de corps*, Bourdieu (1989a) takes a critical perspective on the role of the French *Grandes Ecoles* in the transfer and institutionalization of cultural capital by highlighting their elitist and class reproducing character (see also Bourdieu & Darbel, 1969; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1985). It requires an important amount of *economic* and *cultural capital* to get access to these schools, which is denied to the dominant class and therefore represents an exclusion criterion for the dominated class (Hartmann, 2007). Hence, only those who already possess economic (money) and cultural capital (tested in *concours*) can get access to *Grandes Ecoles*, which leads to the reproduction of economic (well-paid job) and cultural (diploma; education) capital⁵. As a result, it is the dominant class on the field that has a strong influence on existing rules of the field and therefore puts effort in the maintenance of these rules (Iellatchitch et al., 2003).

In a nutshell, the interplay between habitus and field can be understood as a circle in a sense of a dialectical relationship between objective structures and subjective dispositions within which objective structures are confirmed and reproduced (Bourdieu, 1977). Thereby, Bourdieu (1977, p. 36) means that habitus is both “*opus operatum*” and “*modus operandi*”, i.e. both the result of practices and modes of practices (see figure 4). Citing Ruyer (1966), Bourdieu (1972) compares this circular relationship with a train that brings its own rails. “Involvement in a field shapes the habitus, which in turn shapes the perceptions and actions” leading to a reproduction of the rules of the field (Crossley, 2001, p. 101).

⁴ Own translation from French.

⁵ We will lead a more detailed discussion about the German and French education systems in our literature review section.

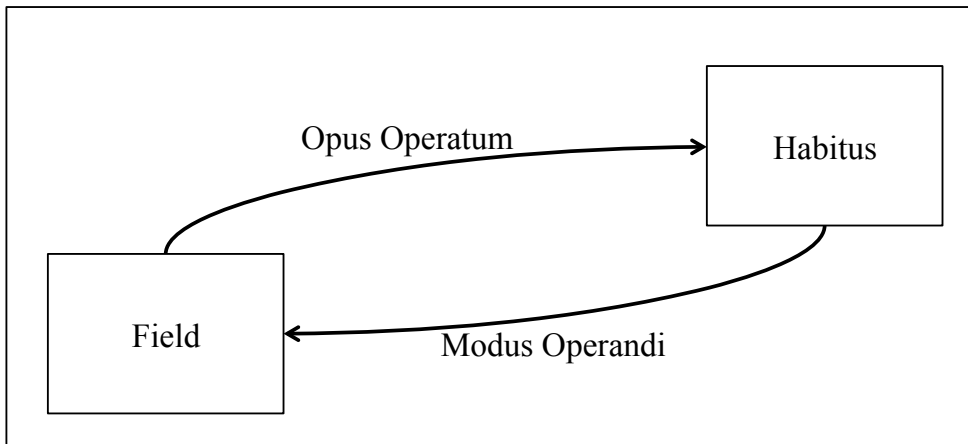


Figure 4. The circular relationship between field and habitus (own illustration).

2.2.4 Summarizing the Interplay Between Field, Capital and Habitus

Bourdieu's Theory of Practice (1972) comprises three main elements, namely *field*, *capital* and *habitus*. The interplay of these elements leads to *strategy* or *practice*, i.e. our unconscious behavior that is in conformity with our interests and that aims at achieving our objectives by investing *capital* and fighting for *capital*. Bourdieu's major contribution is his "structuralist constructivism or constructivist structuralism" (Bourdieu, 1989b, p. 14), i.e. the reconciliation between structure and agency or macro and micro. In this respect, Bourdieu understands *practice* as the result of social structures on a particular *field* (structure; macro) where certain rules apply and also of one's *habitus* (agency; micro), i.e. the embodied history that is manifested in our system of thinking, feeling, perceiving and behaving. The habitus assures the collective belief in the rules of the social game (*illusio*) and that actors act in accordance with their position on the field (*doxa*), which depends on their relative amount and structure of economic, cultural (and social) *capital*.

The possibility of pursuing individual strategies by exchanging capital already suggests that agents are not puppets whose actions are fully manipulated by external field forces. According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 108f.), agents are "bearers of capitals and, depending on their trajectory and on the position they occupy on the field (...), they have a propensity to orient themselves actively either toward the preservation of the distribution of capital or toward the subversion of this distribution". As a result, Bourdieu suggests that agents have a certain degree of liberty in their choice of strategies and practices or in other words, they have a certain degree of agency in their fight for relative positions on the social field. However, agents always act intentionally without intentions in accordance with the rules of the game and their relative position on the field (structure), which is why Wacquant (1989, p. 45) also qualifies that "individuals make choices, but do not choose the principles of these choices" and are therefore strongly influenced by structure (Özbilgin & Tatli, 2005). If habitus brings into focus the agency end of the equation, field focuses on the structural part (Grenfell & James, 1998).

Figure 5 below shows the complex interplay between Bourdieu's major elements and also highlights the circular relationship between structure and habitus that acts as structured structures (*opus operatum*) and structuring structures (*modus operandi*) at the same time.

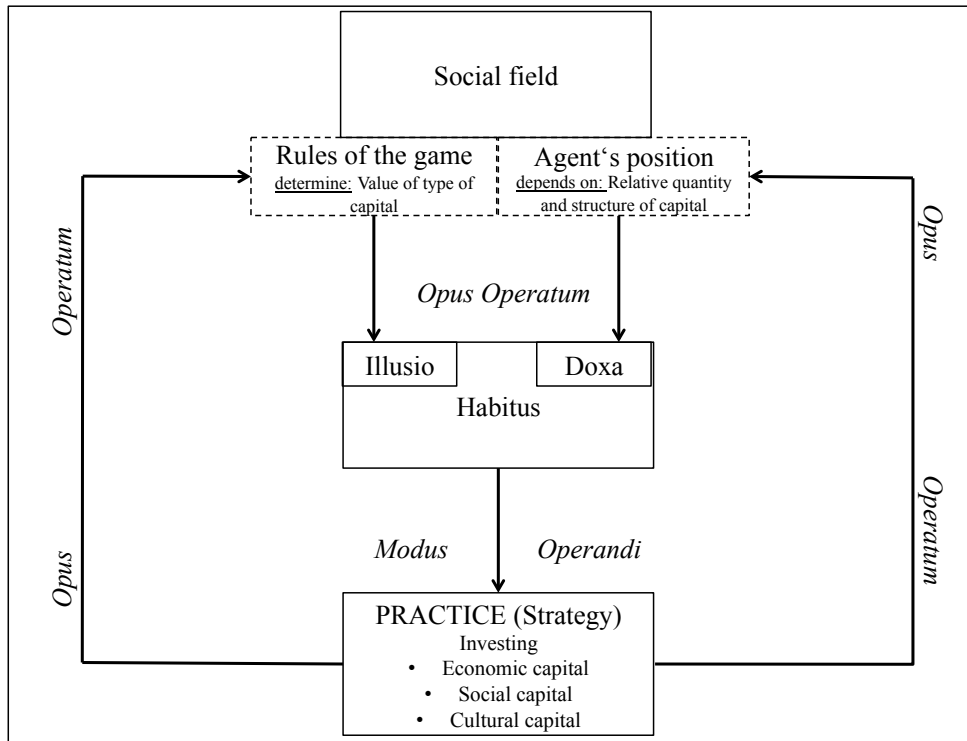


Figure 5. The interplay of field, capital and habitus (own illustration).

2.3 Bourdieu's Theory of Practice in a Franco-German Career Mobility Context

Bourdieu's Theory of Practice has been increasingly used in management research (Golsorkhi & Huault, 2006). Having presented the main ideas of Bourdieu's Theory of Practice, this section will serve us to apply our theoretical framework to our concrete research project.

2.3.1 Bourdieu's Theory as Framework in Career Research

One upcoming area using Bourdieu as theoretical framework is the research conducted about careers in general (see e.g. Mayrhofer and colleagues, 2003, 2004a, b, c, 2007) and, although less frequent, careers in an international work mobility context (see e.g. Al Ariss and colleagues, 2011, 2012; Andresen & Walther, 2013; Doherty & Dickmann, 2009). Put in a Bourdieuan context, careers unfold on *career fields*, where certain rules apply. *Career fields* are a network of positions where *career agents* endowed with a certain amount of *career*

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