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HABITUS, CULTURE, AND HUMAN SEXUALITY. NOTIONS OF CONSENT IN THE SEXUAL HABITUS

Abstract

Sexuality is an important part of social life, as is understanding what constitutes the acceptable behaviors, dispositions, language and discourses within its walls. This article aims to consolidate the relationship of classical sexual script theory with Bourdieu’s notion of habitus through an expansion of what has been called erotic habitus. The article aims to dissect the perception of corporeal norms and dispositions as reflective of patterned valuations of what is considered adequate or normalized behavior in a sexual setting, including the communication of desire and reactions to it. By investigating a sexual habitus it becomes possible to take in the umbrella that is a collective sexuality which is culturally conditioned and in turn impinges on individual or idiosyncratic desires and expressions of such. The purpose of the following article is to provide the theoretical background through which sexual practices may be studied as much more than simply the study of desire.

Keywords: habitus, culture, human sexuality

Introduction

Sexuality is located within various spaces of social life and encompasses within it a multitude of fields, including the sexualities of individuals in various cultural contexts, sexual orientations, and different spheres of cultural practice. For this reason, understanding human adherence to and internalization of patterns within sexuality should be justified by proper sociological theories which will additionally aid in navigating the more insidious or encumbering aspects of human sexual behavior.

Because habitus allows us to explain both how and why social agents conceive and (re)construct the social world that they do, it can be utilized as an adequate tool for the study of the sexual social practices as they are constrained by the social world. The notion of *habitus* is linked to sexuality in that practices which arise from the learned history of human activity also pertains to some of the oldest practices surrounding human corporeal interaction, namely sexual practices within various sexual fields. As

being linked to the cultural variation of behavior that is related to social factors which influence their undertaking, habitus is reflected within the behavior and choices people make to communicate desire or engage in sexual practices within the physical sexual setting.

Within the literature on the subject, erotic habitus has been defined as “interplay between gendered embodiment, erotic desires, and history of sexual practices” (Schilt, Windsor 2014: 732). These concepts exist within the sexual fields of social life, which vary from heterosexual fields to fields of more marginalized sexualities. Sexual practices are naturally related to the body, since such practices rarely exist as separate from the bodily sphere, and if they do, they still exist within the same sexual field. I hence focus on the heterosexual norms that surround practices of consent within the heterosexual field, here referred to as *sexual habitus*, as related to the sexual scripts which provide the social factors that play into encoded behaviors.

It is, hence, important to bear in mind that sexuality has been often linked with gender, and that in concentrating on the notions of sexual practices (where the normative is concerned), gender and its definition to those who dealt with constructs in habitus must be defined. In his article, and subsequent book, entitled “La Domination Masculine,” Bourdieu (1990) drew on the research he conducted in the context of the Kabyle of North Africa in order to show how “masculine domination assumes a natural, self-evident status through its inscription in the objective structures of the social world” (McNay 2000: 37). Structures like these are then embodied and reproduced in the habitus of individual people who have encoded sexual behaviors in part through their historical production. The same may be said within the sphere of sexuality and the sexual practices that go with them. Because throughout life and culture, sexual behavior is part of the highly embodied sociocultural practices that one may come across, it is important to see that negotiations of sexual consent and its understandings as the embodied communication fall into that same category to an extent.

The following article is a review of the research and scholarly reflection carried out on the subjects of habitus (also referred to through the notion of *embodiment* in Bourdieu's (1984) and other works, *cf.* Tolman 2005; Tolman, Bowman, Fahs 2014), field and capital as they relate to human sexuality, taking mostly from Bourdieu (1984; 2001) and transposing those ideas into a field of social significance.

Sexual consent

The understanding of habitus can be said to bear cultural variation, similarly to the way that sexual practices do, making it a complex subject for discussion. The notion of sexual consent is strongly tied to gendered norms, and thus gendered habitus, which to my mind may be tied to the existence of gender ideology and gender stereotype which come about as a result of its manifestation. Bourdieu (2001) put forth a notion of “sexually

characterized”, gendered habitus as the act of adopting gendered norms and inculcating them into bodily practice, in the ways we think, feel and interact within others.

The notion of sexual consent has been increasingly associated with the idea that is opposite to it, namely that of *sexual coercion*, which is a person is physically or non-physically pressurized into taking part in a sexual activity. Sexual consent has been investigated in many cases to find ways of preventing coercive types of behavior, as well as to seek out the origins of models such as the miscommunication model in gender and linguistic study (Kitzinger, Frith 1999). Although definitions of sexual consent vary based on author and approach, their relation to negotiation and exchange of behaviors are embedded within the majority of definitions. Hall has defined sexual consent as “the voluntary approval of what is done or proposed by another; permission; agreement in opinion or sentiment” (Hall 1998: 6), whereas Hickman and Muehlenhard (1999) defined sexual consent as the “free verbal or nonverbal communication of a feeling of willingness” to engage in sexual activity (Hall 1998: 3).

Alongside Bourdieu, Simon and Gagnon’s (1986) sexual script theory highlights the goings on of sexual practice through the illustration of embodiment of cultural understandings of the order of events in sexual situations (including those leading up to and through coitus). The embodiment of cultural understandings of sexuality becomes obvious in the discourse of those describing, discussing or enacting consensual sex are highlighted in the aspect of the concept of habitus and its manifestation through the sexual sphere (or field) of social life.

Understanding habitus and field

Although habitus has been a term understood with variation by the scholars that have dealt with it in their work, an understanding for the perspective and purpose of this paper should be provided.

Habitus, as a concept refers to the individual’s “set of bodily dispositions and mental structures” through which the social world is understood, interpreted and reproduced as based on past experiences and socialization, such as through schooling, education or learning from parents (Powell 2008: 172). Habitus works within various fields overall, which are the “obligatory conventions, values, discourse or the ‘rules of the game’ that are the contexts for social interactions” (Powell 2008). If the field constitutes these things, then the habitus is the way that we enter a field with the knowledge that we possess about ourselves and the world around us, and the creation of conscious or unconscious strategies comes about depending on the balance between likeliness of success and appropriate challenges.

It is important to bear in mind that different cultures, different industries and different classes of people have different *habiti* within a field, which guide and restrain the way that people behave or comport themselves. These types of behavior encompass the ways that people act or communicate, both verbally and non-verbally.

Although the bodily constraints, behaviors and dispositions have been described in terms of *hexis* as well, their link to habitus is to be elucidated, for from my understanding, habitus would not be possible without hexis. Additionally, in that bodily comportment and bodily behaviors and intrinsically linked to ways of communicating, albeit nonverbally, these learned and socialized communication strategies also belong to the embodiment of culture that have a hand in forming cultural habitus. Such an understanding of habitus includes the way that sexuality and sexual behavior is understood and reproduced in interaction.

Sexuality, the body, capital and habitus

The sexual field which is directly related to sexual habitus encompasses the knowledge of norms and rules that are engendered in heterosexual sexual interactions, including the norms of dominance, submission, passivity and agency (Canan *et al.* 2018). Considering that such learned behaviors are highly gendered in their outward expression and in the way that they are understood, the internalization of scripts associated with gender (as part of the sexual field or otherwise) is linked to habitus in its deeply engrained nature within human experience and understanding. In the case of heterosexual norms, heterosexual field can be defined as existing in its own right as a separate social milieu to carry out such practices, communicative and corporeal.

One can consider the sexual field a viable point of study because, as Green (2013: 15) states, “the collective nature of interaction in the sexual field transforms attitudes, desires, and practices into new normative forms, in terms of both what we desire and what we think others find desirable— such as proper comportment, attractive appearance, and desirable status markers, including socioeconomic background.” Viewing sexuality and the norms which surround it make it possible to understand human sexual social life and interaction as a part of reproduced experience.

Bourdieu's (1986) notion of capital includes *cultural capital*, which has to do with cultural codes, behavior and knowing what to do in a given field. Although Mauss (1973 [1935]) did not make the direct and explicit connection between the bodily disposition and sexuality, it is worth noting that the subject is also embedded within his ideas and descriptions of habitus as the aspects of culture which are anchored in the body or the everyday practices of individuals. Sexual practices can encompass a multitude of behaviors with a given sexual field, including the sexual positions taken by those who are their practitioners, the manner in which sex is negotiated and how consent is understood. Such aspects fall into the same pattern as the attachment of culture to corporeal behavior and the socialization that is connected to it.

Sexual *habitus* is linked to (and at times even synonymous with) erotic habitus (Green 2008), which, in the terms provided, can be described as “an erotic habitus that orients the undifferentiated biological libido toward particular social forms” (Green 2008: 598). It is arguable that these types of predispositions and behaviors are historically

learned and reflected in culture, as was demonstrated by Mead (1963 [1935]) in her work on primitive societies. I argue that, as a concept, Green's (ibid) erotic habitus can be remolded and expanded into the concept of a sexual habitus that is dependent on the sexual field in which it is located.

As Tolman *et al.* (2014) state: "our bodies are the permeable boundary between our individual sense of self and the society in which we live" (2014: 759). Within the scope of field and sexual habitus, when considering issues surrounding human sexuality and the production of sexual behavior, it is crucial to take heed of the fact that sexuality is a very complex subject that cannot necessarily be confined to collective social structures but are always imparted to individuals in that they have autonomy and express themselves in varying ways where the question of intimate settings is concerned (Green 2008).

In their paper, Tolman *et al.* refer to the aspect taken from social sciences, including psychology, that is *embodiment*, thus the two distinct processes or phenomena that are "being embodied or embodying the social" (2014: 760). We are concerned with the latter of the two ideas, for this may be seen as being identical to the idea of the habitus, at least where bodily communication and sexual goals as related to the physical and corporeal relations are concerned. The human internalization of norms (thus taken as a social and historical given as imbued within the psyche of the actor) comes to take reign in situations which allow it to thrive and dictate a person's behavior and their explanation of it, as well. This is, of course reflective of Bourdieu's notion of the embodiment of cultural capital, whereby actors physically manifest learned and reproduced histories.

Tolman *et al.* (2014) draw on the works and reflections of Merleau-Ponty (1962), whose work in Phenomenology has provided much insight into the understanding of the body and senses. Merleau-Ponty (1962) provided a description of the 'body-subject', which was in other words the 'lived body', a subject capable of experience which is not simply a "passive sensory-data receptor that relies on our consciousness and cognition to give it meaning" (Tolman *et al.* 2014: 761). This is further explained as the body's direct contact with world experiences through its entanglement with social and physical goings-on, thus making it clear that the body is "better informed than we are" because it has "latent knowledge" (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 238).

It has been highlighted that the erotic aspects of habitus, including within the subject of sexual desire, is a conceptual resource that is understudied (Green 2008; Schilt, Windsor 2014). The importance of the sexual setting within which aforementioned acts, dispositions and behaviors are determined can be seen as working within the frame of a *sexual market*, the basis of which may be found as being akin to the metaphor of the marriage market (Houston *et al.* 2005) in which, traditionally speaking, romantic exchanges are made between men and women, thereby upholding heteronormative ideologies.

Western ideas of social sexual practices

Some scholars have challenged the idea of the 'heteronormative habitus', by proposing solutions that would incorporate awareness of other sexualities (not simply heterosexuality) into the education system (Schilt, Windsor 2014). Other works have not *per se* dealt with habitus as a concept 'out loud', but have ventured into the subject of the embodiment of sexuality and sexual practice through socialization, thus reflecting what is known about the habitus as a concept (Tolman *et al.* 2014).

As has been made clear above, sexual practice and sexual culture are part of human socialization, and have their status as embodied forms of disposition (Herdt 1999). This can be seen and defined as being a part of the norms that are learned and occur through historical and lifetime socialization and education (hence their relation to primary habitus and secondary habitus) (Green 2008; Sapiro 2015).

The consideration of the Western norms for sexual practice, including the negotiation of sexual intercourse and the implications that might have for gendered actors who might or might not want to take part, is crucial in understanding exactly how cultures these notions tend to be. Not only are they cultured in the socio-geographical sense, but also in the ways that normative sexualities are formed and what such narratives and discourses are built upon. This might have the gravest consequences in society, as I have mentioned earlier the gendered bias that the toll of the habitus of sexual practice and sexuality in general. By making associations of gendered behavior as having an kind of leverage over whether sexual consent has been negotiated or not.

It is worth noting that Mead's (1963 [1935]) early work on the sexuality of primitive societies has a hand in demonstrating the cultural weight that sexuality bears on its practitioners. Her work in itself is a demonstration of the habitus in relation to both gender and sexuality because it demonstrates that sexual behavior as a social construct does not reflect a strict type of disposition conditioned by biological factors, but is a subject that is reproduced through generations of teaching and learning.

Heteronormativity, gender and habitus

When it comes to the learning of sexual norms and practices, it must be highlighted that heteronormativity is at the forefront of knowledge regarding social sexual culture and embodiment. As stated earlier, heterosexual practices belong to a separate sexual field in their own right, and should thus be analyzed according to a habitus which reflects the norms that impinge on the embodiment of gendered norms in sexual interaction.

If the concept of habitus encompasses what is socialized and therefore either actively or passively a learned experience, the notions that engender the social construction of cultures may not be ignored. This includes the 'doing' of gender as described in the studies on gendered subjects as socialized subjects (West, Zimmerman 1987). This means that within such a concept of embodiment of gender in sexuality "girls struggle to articulate

their embodied feelings, respond with silence, or proudly demand their sexual subjectivity, their words (or lack thereof) take down the window dressings of male protection and respect to reveal the ongoing pressures of compulsory heterosexuality” (Tolman 2005: 6). Male sexuality, on the other hand, is seen through the prism of that hegemonic or dominant masculinities that have been inserted into the center of men’s sexual roles.

This aspect of heteronormativity as a defining component in the sphere discussed is particularly important when analyzing the opposite of consenting to sexual desire, rather encompassed within the expression of a non-desire. Where gender is concerned, it remains true that an overwhelming majority of victims of sexual assault are women and girls (Mouzos, Makkai 2004), the gendered aspects of consent norms and habits are of importance, as it is the attribution to “differences in men’s and women’s gender roles, in which women are expected to be passive/accommodating while men are presumed to be sexually assertive/pursuant” that informs the social perspectives being talked about where then habitus of sexuality is concerned (Powell 2008: 170). This demonstrates the correlation between habitus as a set of ingrained dispositions with communicative norms that are oftentimes essentialized where gender is concerned and hence have an impact on the interpretation of where consent is and is not viewed as cogent.

Notions of habitus in sexuality as impinging on consent

Habitus is a concept that is tied to the cultural learning that human beings undergo in order to communicate and gain access to resources in the world. Powell (2008) draws on Bourdieu’s habitus to illustrate the historically socialized and internalized nature of sexual practices where sexual consent is concerned.

As defined by Green (2008; 2013), the erotic and desire-relations of sexuality are oftentimes omitted from the scholarly discussion and analysis of sexuality within sociology as a discipline, and the erotic habitus aims to fill in that gap. However it may also be noted that the formulation of such a concept of habitus may circumvent the gap in knowledge regarding sexual communication overall, encompassing also unwanted sexual interaction and understanding in that regard. In discussing such aspects of sexuality within various sexual fields, subjects related to sexuality, including how scripts might infringe upon the communication of desire and consent, might be better understood. As de Klerk *et al.* (2007: 115) puts it, “the habitus of the dominant tends to pervade the social system, making it difficult for those with an alternative ‘habitus’ (such as females or members of racial minorities) to participate as equals. In order to achieve change, some challenge of the status quo is necessary, and this article tracks the effect of repeated challenges over time.” This is the very context in which habitus is seen as impinging on sexual consent.

Because habitus is constituted by the implicit attitudes and dispositions that underline behavior, its relations to the negotiation of sexual consent may be seen as causing a potential rift in the debate of miscommunication, normal communicative (verbal and nonverbal) behavior, and the learned social and internalized structures that maintain

an essentialist and victim-blaming approach where sexual consent, sexual assault and sexual coercion is concerned.

Conclusions

From the readings and reviews of the literature on the subject, it becomes clear that human sexuality and sexual practice must be taken into consideration when looking at the habitus as a theoretical concept, and as an issue complementary to the sociological theory of sexual scripts. Because Bourdieu's (1986) notion of embodied cultural capital encompasses bodily dispositions as a reflection of human learning over time, the way that sexual behavior within sexual interaction can be in a sense viewed through the prism of collective and individual traits which help to determine its definition.

In order to properly expand on the idea of erotic habitus as presented in earlier literature (Green 2008), the definition of sexual habitus should not simply incorporate aspects of desire and its structuring, but also aspects of sexual refusal, which are equally important to understanding the negotiation of sexuality. Sexual habitus is heavily reliant on the sexual culture or subculture within which it is found, and it can be changed as individuals move from one sexual field to another via socialization within those social milieus.

Overall, the subject of habitus and sexuality is one that is decidedly understudied and should be further investigated in relation to terms of the embodiment of social structures and culture. The presented reflection about habitus, the body and social structures within the sphere of sexuality has many implications for understandings of the issues therein encompassed. The understanding of the habitus of sexual practice is not only here seen as important in fully understanding the phenomenology of human sexuality in the social sense, but also so as to grasp the germination of the social perception of sexual consent, which takes from understandings of the negotiation of sex within various sexual settings.

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