

A Bourdieusian response to Zahavi

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Social constructivist accounts purport to examine the individual from the standpoint of society. However, Zahavi argues that such accounts are incapable of explaining the 'mineness' character of experience. In this paper, by using Bourdieu's concept of habitus, I respond to Zahavi by offering a Bourdieusian social constructivist account that captures the 'mineness' of the practical experiences of social subjects inhabiting social habitats. Bourdieu's account, I conclude, offers an important theoretical resource for philosophers to better grasp the social-individual relationship.

Keywords: Bourdieu, habitus, subjectivity, selfhood, coherence, social constructivism

1. Introduction

How to understand the relationship between the group and the self? In section one of his rich 2023 article, Zahavi rejects a Meadian social constructivist (MSC) approach in favor of a Husserlian phenomenological stance to tackle this question. According to MSC, we are "largely shaped by the communities we are part of" and flourish as individuals "as a result of the social relationships we engage in" (Zahavi, 2023, p. 3). It is only by being a member of a social community that we come to develop a sense of self through our interactions with others; more precisely, a human organism comes to acquire a sense of self by reflexively adopting the attitude of others towards oneself as an object (Mead, 1934/1972). Although Zahavi broadly agrees with MSC about the importance of the social world in shaping individuals, he censures MSC for failing "as an account of experiential subjectivity" (Zahavi, 2023, p. 4). Why? Well, while MSC develops an account of the self as a *social object* that involves a process of "socially enabled self-objectification" (p. 4), it neglects the *experiencing subject*. Consider the following. When you or I consciously perceive something or somebody, think a thought, or feel an emotion, we experience these perceptions, thoughts, and emotions as *our own*. For Zahavi, following Husserl, such intentional experiences necessarily involve a *subject* for whom that experience is experienced as *mine* (p. 5). To capture this basic feature of *mineness* of any experience, Zahavi posits a *minimal self* to "do justice" to the

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subjective character of experience (p. 5). If MSC were to consider the nature of experience, Zahavi argues, it would have to rethink how a reflexive *social* self emerges from and relates to a more basic (minimal) *experiential* self (pp. 4–5). For Zahavi, following Arendt, since communal life essentially involves individuals with distinct perspectives from diverse backgrounds living together in cooperation with each other, a “proper appreciation” of the first-person perspective is needed to capture each individual’s unique viewpoint(s) (p. 4). However, as MSC or any other account construing the group to be prior to the self cannot properly appreciate the first-person perspective, such accounts, Zahavi concludes, “must be rejected as *incoherent*” (p. 4, emphasis added).

While I do not disagree with Zahavi’s analysis of MSC, I question his claim that *any* account attempting to derive individual subjectivity from the social world must be rejected as incoherent. Are social constructivist approaches necessarily incapable of explaining experiential subjectivity? While Zahavi motivates his case by focusing on a particular instance of social constructivism, namely a Meadian one, in this paper I borrow from *Bourdieuian* sociology to sketch an alternative social constructivist account that derives the self from the social world while “doing justice” to the experiencing subject. I contend that Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, which refers to embodied structures dispositions acquired by subjects through engagement with a pre-structured social world (Bourdieu, 1990), offers an alternative explanation to that of Zahavi’s minimal self for capturing the first-person character of experience. *Habitus*, I argue, offers a “coherentist” account that explains the *mineness* of an experience as a product of its *coherence* with an *embodied background* of diachronic and synchronic habits, dispositions, skills, etc. (Slors & Jongepier, 2014, pp. 201–203). The experience of typing on the keyboard as I write these words, for instance, is *mine* not because it is experienced as such by a minimal self but because it coheres with my psychosomatic matrix of skills, habits, and practical intentions of typing (more below). It is the coherence of an experience with a “body-biography” of which it is a part that constitutes the mineness of that experience (Slors & Jongepier, 2014, p. 206). Thus, by using Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, I purport to offer a Bourdieuian response to Zahavi by sketching a “coherent” account of social constructivism that offers a “proper appreciation” of the first-person perspective. In the following sections, I first trace Bourdieu’s social constructivist approach in section 2, after which I unpack his concept of *habitus* and its relation to experiential subjectivity in section 3.

To be sure, and to forestall a potential objection, I am not offering a “straw man” argument against Zahavi’s criticism of MSC; indeed, I agree with Zahavi’s stance on MSC’s neglect of experiential subjectivity. Rather, my aim is to present Zahavi with a more “coherent” social constructivist account than MSC for consideration and invite him to reflect on its potential for grasping the relationship between the group and the self. My broader aim, like Zahavi, is to highlight useful theoretical resources from different research programs and identify potential avenues of cross-disciplinary fertilization from which our collective understanding of the “complex and multifaceted” nature of social reality can profit (Zahavi, 2023, pp. 2, 14).

2. Beyond subjectivism and objectivism: Bourdieu's dialectical approach

What is Bourdieu's brand of social constructivism and how does it "do justice" to experience? While social science has traditionally oscillated between two opposite poles—*subjectivism* and *objectivism*—for studying the social world, Bourdieu's approach aims to dialectically integrate both these perspectives: "[i]t is my aim to *integrate* phenomenological analysis into a global approach of which it is one phase (the first, subjective phase), the second being the objectivist analysis" (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 209, original emphasis). But why does Bourdieu propose an "integration" of these two contrasting approaches?

2.1. *Subjectivism: A phenomenological approach*

According to Bourdieu, following Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, the primary form of knowledge for subjects in the world is a *practical* one. Subjects dwell in the social world and move about it as in a familiar household, absorbed and engaged in their activities (Bourdieu, 2020, p. 81). When they encounter objects in the course of their everyday lives, they confront them as equipment having a practical function. For instance, when "[f]aced with a hammer, we don't act like an archaeologist and ask: 'What is that for?'; we pick it up and bang on the nail. The practical response to the existence of a hammer...is to hammer" (Bourdieu, 2020, p. 37). But why do we experience the social world in this practical manner? Since our practical relation with the world is so obvious and natural to us, we seem to hardly question this *doxic* attitude. Thus, as a sociologist, Bourdieu aims to develop "an adequate science of the social world" which "include[s] the mode of knowledge that social subjects put into practice in their everyday activities" (p. 61), a task for which he identifies phenomenology as a "main theoretical guide" (p. 63). For Bourdieu (1977), since phenomenology "sets out to make explicit the truth of primary experience of the social world" (p. 3), it offers useful tools for investigating the unquestioned experiences of subjects' everyday lives.

2.2. *Objectivism: A structuralist approach*

However, a purely phenomenological or subjectivist approach for studying the social world, Bourdieu concedes, has certain shortcomings highlighted by *objectivist* or *structuralist* approaches. Objectivism makes an epistemological break with everyday experience to study the social world in-itself (Bourdieu et al., 1991, p. 18). According to Durkheim (1895/1982), for instance, "social life must be explained, not by the conception of those who participate in it, but by deep causes which lie outside of consciousness" (p. 171). Structuralists construe the social world as a *structure* of positions inhabited by subjects who come to have viewpoints because of

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their position in social space (e.g., Levi-Strauss, 1949/1969). For structuralists, “social relations cannot be reduced to relationships between subjectivities driven by intentions or ‘motivations’, because they are established between social conditions and positions and therefore have more reality than the subjects whom they link” (Bourdieu et al., 1991, p. 18). For example, a structuralist explanation for why different people purchase different car makes would involve an analysis of not their motivations and desires but of the socioeconomic structures in which those individuals are embedded. For Bourdieu (1977), objectivist knowledge “constructs the objective relations...which structure...primary knowledge, practical and tacit, of the familiar world” (p. 3).

The objectivist perspective, Bourdieu points out, foregrounds certain limitations of a purely subjectivist one. For instance, while a phenomenological approach descriptively captures the lived experiences of subjects in the social world, it does not consider the social conditions which make those experiences possible (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 26). Consider Zahavi's (2023) Husserlian phenomenological (HP) stance, for instance. According to Zahavi (2023), HP offers a “proper appreciation” of experiential subjectivity by capturing the *mineness* character of first-person experience. More specifically, an HP approach reveals a *minimal self* as a necessary condition of possibility for human experience (Zahavi, 2023, pp. 7–8). For Bourdieu, however, phenomenological approaches like HP are deficient in their ability to question the “conditions of [their] own possibility” (p. 3). While HP seeks to uncover the structures of consciousness underpinning everyday lived experience, it does not perform the “ultimate reduction” and question the enabling (social) conditions of those structures themselves:

[P]henomenologists systematically forget to carry out an ultimate “reduction”, the one which would reveal to them the social conditions of the possibility of the “reduction” and the *epoche*. What is radically excluded from phenomenological analysis...of “primary experience” of the social world is the question of the economic and social conditions of the *belief* which consists in [taking the everyday world as it gives itself]. (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 233, original emphasis)

But why should phenomenology question itself? Here, Bourdieu's objectivist tendencies come to light despite his phenomenological commitments. For Bourdieu, “[s]ociology cannot constitute itself as a science truly separated from common-sense notions unless it combats the systematic pretensions of spontaneous [i.e., phenomenological] sociology” (Bourdieu et al., 1991, p. 15). Objectivism, by breaking with everyday experience to study the social world “as a system of objective relations independent of individual consciousnesses” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 4), shows how one's everyday experiences are influenced by their position in social space (p. 3). Thus, Bourdieu (1990) argues, insofar that social subjects are *situated* in social space, their subjective experiences, rather than an element in the explanation of social reality, must itself be accounted for by that reality by reference to objective sociohistorical structures (p. 27).

2.3. A dialectical approach

However, objectivism is not without its own shortcomings. In distancing itself from the perspectives of social subjects situated in social space, objectivism, Bourdieu recognizes, can only capture the doxic lived experiences of subjects from the scholarly or scientific standpoint of a *spectator*, “from the outside” so to speak (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 3). Why is this a problem? According to Bourdieu (2020), due to its inability to capture the practical lived experiences of subjects, objectivism tends to build a scientific model of practical knowledge and proceed “as if the relation of practical knowledge were the same as the relation of scholarly knowledge” (p. 33). For example, inhabiting and dwelling in a house as a resident is different from planning and constructing the house as an architect (p. 82). Here, there are two legitimate modes of knowledge of the house—the resident’s *phenomenological/practical* knowledge and the architect’s *scholarly/scientific* knowledge—and projecting the experience of the architect into the mind of the inhabitant who lives there constitutes a fundamental sociological error (p. 82). For Bourdieu, social subjects are not spectators, rather, they live in the social world and move around it as in a familiar household (p. 81) – a stance which cannot be captured by objectivism owing to its epistemological and methodological commitments.

Thus, to preserve the valuable insights of objectivism while recognizing the importance of phenomenology, Bourdieu (1977) calls for an order of knowledge that “does not cancel out the gains from objectivist knowledge but conserves and transcends them by integrating the truth of practical experience and of the practical mode of knowledge” (p. 4). Hence, Bourdieu proposes a *dialectical* “social constructionist” approach that captures the lived practical experiences of subjects inhabiting social structures, a stance I label as Bourdieusian social constructivism (BSC).

3. Habitus: Rethinking subjectivity

What does BSC tell us about the relationship between the social world and the experiencing subject? The answer to this question, I argue, lies in Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, to which we now turn.

3.1. What is habitus?

When we encounter, say, a hammer or a book or a chair in our daily lives, we immediately know how to use these objects – the hammer affords hammering, the book affords reading, and the chair affords sitting. But if we were to visit an archaeological site on a vacation and encounter unfamiliar

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objects, the practical function of those objects would elude us. Why? According to Bourdieu, we come to acquire certain dispositions or ways of being or *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 214, n. 1) by embodying sociocultural practices learned within the sociocultural habitats we inhabit. In the former scenario, the habitus enables us to practically comport towards objects encountered in our habitats in appropriate ways – we hammer with hammers instead of chairs and we read books instead of sitting on them (Bourdieu, 2020, p. 33). Crucially, this practical comportment is neither *deliberative* nor *mechanical*; rather, it is a flexible response adjusted towards the demands of the situations in which we find ourselves (p. 105). For Bourdieu, the subject engaged in practice is caught up in the world — “[s]he inhabits it like a garment...or a familiar habitat” (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 143) — and “[s]he feels at home in the world because the world is also in [her], in the form of habitus” (p. 143). At the archaeological site, however, we “come across customs or costumes that we are unable to inhabit” because we lack the background of sociocultural practices that enables us to acquire a habitus to engage with those alien objects in appropriate ways (Bourdieu, 2020, p. 25). In short, for Bourdieu: “[w]hat I call the habitus – or we might say the ‘practical sense’ – is the practical knowledge and mastery of the patterns of the social world that, without even organising these patterns in conceptual terms, allows our behaviour to adapt to these patterns” (p. 67).

How does a subject acquire habitus? For Bourdieu, following Merleau-Ponty's lead, the lived body—intentionality incarnate—is key to understanding habitus (Bourdieu, 2020, p. 102). The material conditions of existence characteristic of the social habitats that subjects occupy shape their bodies by inculcating in them systems or structures of dispositions (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72). Since bodily subjects are exposed to their surroundings and risk emotions, lesions, suffering, and even death, they are forced to take their surroundings seriously by acquiring dispositions which are open to the structures' characteristic of their habitats (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 140). Bodily subjects acquire from their exposure to their social habitats a system of dispositions attuned to their habitats' regularities, which enables them to anticipate and explore the action possibilities of the situations in which they find themselves (p. 135). For example, a professional football player during a football game directs a pass not to where her team-mate actually is at that moment but where she will be when the pass gets to her. Due to her habitus acquired through exposure to a footballing environment, the player has a “feel for the game” and anticipates certain potentialities of action inscribed in the situation (Bourdieu, 2020, p. 79). Thus, for Bourdieu, bodily subjects' practical knowledge of their everyday social surroundings is underpinned by their habitus.

3.2. *A coherentist account of experience*

What does the concept of habitus inform us about the subjective character of experience? According to Bourdieu (2000), “[t]he principle of practical comprehension is not a knowing consciousness (a transcendental consciousness, as Husserl presents it...) but the practical sense of

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a habitus inhabited by the world it inhabits" (p. 142). For Bourdieu, following Merleau-Ponty, when we are practically engaged in some activity, say typing on a keyboard, there is no transcendental ego doing the experiencing or object (cogitatum) that is experienced during the activity (p. 144). Instead, there is an active "bodily tension" or *motor intentionality* through which my fingers skillfully find the keys on the keyboard that solicit my body's acquired typing habits, skills, and dispositions without me having to look at them (p. 144). In the experiential structure of motor intentionality, habitus and world imply and are directed towards each other, unlike in Husserl's experiential structure of *cognitive* intentionality (ego-cogitatio-cogitatum) where a transcendental ego is directed towards an object.

Recall that for Zahavi (2023), following Husserl, a minimal self is part of every experience that a subject experiences as *mine* (p. 5). When I type on the keyboard or hammer on a nail, I experience the typing or hammering experience as mine. But if one were to reject the subject-experience-object structure, as Bourdieu does, then how does one purport to capture the *mineness* of experience without the minimal self? How does habitus explain 'mineness'? I propose that the mineness of an experience consists in the *coherence* of that experience with an embodied background of diachronic and synchronic habits, dispositions, skills, etc. (Slors & Jongepier, 2014, pp. 201–203). Through repeated practical encounters with varying social situations, bodily subjects come to acquire systems of dispositions or habitus that have been shaped by a vast amount of previous dealings. For instance, through numerous past instances of typing on keyboards, I—the bodily subject—have come to develop a "typing" habitus that enables me to skillfully type these words on the keyboard in front of me. Similarly, through numerous instances of playing semi-professional badminton, I have come to acquire a "badminton" habitus that enables to successfully anticipate my opponent's next shot in advance of him playing it and thus skillfully play a badminton game. To be sure, when I play badminton, my "typing" habitus does not disappear, rather it remains in my bodily background and vice-versa when I type. If we were to conceive of one's different sets of dispositions as simultaneously existing *narratives*, then these narratives together constitute one story that forms the "bodily backbone of a person's stream of [practical] consciousness" – an "embodied biography" (Slors & Jongepier, 2014, pp. 205-206). The *mineness*, then, of a practical experience is the coherence of that experience with a given embodied biography. The experience of typing on the keyboard as I write these words, for instance, is *mine* not because it is experienced as such by a minimal self but because it coheres with my body-biography.

In summary, this section offers a rudimentary sketch of a coherentist account of experience for Bourdieu's concept of habitus. While much more work needs to be done to flesh out the details, I nonetheless offer BSC as an alternative to Zahavi's account of minimal selves for understanding the relationship between the social world and the self.

4. Conclusion

According to Zahavi (2023), accounts purporting to derive individual subjectivity from the social, such as MSC, “must be rejected as incoherent” because of their neglect of experiential subjectivity (p. 4). In this paper, I have borrowed from Bourdieusian sociology to sketch an alternative social constructivist account—BSC—that “does justice” to experiential subjectivity. I thus offer BSC as a useful theoretical resource for better grasping the “complex and multifaceted” nature of social reality.¹

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