# BOURDIEU'S PRCTICE THEORY AND A MULTI-LAYERED EXAMINATION OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

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## Keywords

organizational change, Bourdieu, practice theory, ethnography

## Aim of abstract/paper - research question

Academics have previously called for greater engagement with critical theory to reveal the social and political context of sport management (c.f. Frisby, 2005, Skinner & Edwards, 2005). To assist in this call we use Pierre Bourdieu's conceptual and methodological approach to study organizational change. The research sought to answer the following question. When examining organizational change how can we better understand the interaction of endogenous and exogenous pressures?

## Theoretical background

Previously sport management scholars have developed hybrid frameworks for examining change (Cunningham, 2002; Kikulis, Slack and Hinings, 1995). These frameworks combine multiple theoretical models to examine micro-level and macro-level during change. Subsequently, they have revealed that while external pressures can provide a context and compelling rationale for change, endogenous forces can act to facilitate or resist change. While this has enhanced our understanding of the interaction of the micro and macro, a gap remains as to how these two levels are mediated within the organization. In this presentation we test an approach to bridge these levels by using the meso-level concepts of field and habitus. These concepts are central to Pierre Bourdieu's practice theory. Practice theory can provide a critical examination of social competition, taken-for-granted practices (doxa) and systems of domination in organizational life. Practice theory conceptualises how different levels of analysis interact to provide a dynamic, relational analysis of organization change that considers the shifting power relations between agents that occur over time.

## Methodology, research design and data analysis

A reflexive ethnographic case study was used to provide the methodological framework for this study. Ethnography was chosen because it permits the exploration of the social and political aspects of sport management phenomena from within the organization (Skinner & Edwards, 2005). At the centre of this study is a UK-based sport charity that from 2009-2010 underwent significant change. Over a three and a half year period preceding, during and following this change data were gathered from active-member observations, numerous informal and twenty-six formal interviews with the organization and its partners. Additional data were collected through the maintenance of field and reflexive journals. We followed an approach outlined by Cushion and Jones' (2006) who used three overlapping levels of data to facilitate analysis. The first level used the field notes to create a series of themes on organizational change. Second, the classification of these themes produced a descriptive account of the complexities of the multi-layered interactions. Third, the data were situated within the relational framework of practice theory and a tentative model built.

## Results, discussion and implications/conclusions

The results presented a conditional relationship that existed between endogenous and exogenous pressures, where both appeared to be moderated within the organization. Despite change occurring throughout the organization, some changes were more instrumental than others. Deeper, more ingrained systems resisted change while cosmetic, structural issues were altered (Kikulis, *et al*, 1995). For instance, while structural changes were accepted and adopted by all staff, certain 'managerial-style' work practices were resisted by these same staff due to their perception of the practices' incompatibility with 'the way things work around here'.

Although change certainly occurred throughout the period of study it did not occur without issue or setback.

An incompatibility appeared between both the environment's and management's desired change and the actual change that occurred. We argue that this was primarily due to a conflict between the logic of what was proposed and the ramifications this would have on the organization's taken for granted practices (doxa). For desired change to occur a doxa that valued formality and accountability would have needed priority. While at the macro-level this change was supported, within the organization staff respondents' suggested that the end result of this desired change would negatively impact on the organization's identity and also limit their ability to achieve the outcomes they sought.

While these findings concur with the previous work of Kikulis *et al*, (1995) we argue that the meso-level, organizational aspects that facilitate and hinder change are given greater clarification. The challenge remains on how to properly account for this meso region as the concepts of doxa, field and habitus can all claim some part in this explanation. Hence, further research to refine this aspect of the model is required.

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