Career Guidance and Habitus – The Value of Bourdieu's Concept of Habitus in Career Guidance Research and Practice

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A previous version of this paper was presented at the John Killeen commemorative lecture in 2007. It was a true honour for me to be asked to give this lecture. John Killeen was my PhD supervisor, but sadly passed away a month before my viva in 2004. His interest in guidance research, overview of the field of guidance theory and rigorous scientific frame of mind will always be of great value to me. It was under John Killeen's supervision that I began working on the research presented in this article.

When I started my research on social differences in occupational perceptions (syn.: occupational thinking, occupational conceptualisations, occupational cognitions or concepts), I came across articles by Jean Guichard and associates (1994a, 1994b, 1994c) on *habitus* and occupational thinking. *Habitus* is a central concept in the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002). It is an interesting concept for both researchers and practitioners in the guidance field because it accounts for the social aspects of cognitions and decision making. Bourdieu defined *habitus* as a 'social subjectivity', revealing how the collective or social environment is embedded in people's everyday thinking and being. According to him, the human mind is socially structured (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Occupational perceptions have been an object of study within career development theory for a long time. Mainstream researchers have concluded that we all think about occupations in more or less the same way (Gottfredson, 1981; Goldthorpe and Hope, 1974). A few researchers have criticised this consensual view on occupations and pinpointed social differences in occupational thinking (Coxon & Jones, 1978; Guichard et al., 1994). *Habitus* theory is an interesting vantage point for research in social group differences in occupational thinking because *habitus* accounts for social structures in our thinking. The way we perceive occupations would, therefore, be influenced by our immediate environment. Within career development theory, occupational perceptions are simply defined as the way people think about occupations. Occupational perceptions are an important field of study because there is a strong relationship between individuals' occupational cognitions, their vocational preferences and subsequent career behaviour (Shivy, Rounds & Jones, 1999).

Within the framework of *habitus* theory, occupational thinking is presented as thinking of opposites where the male–female opposite is one of the basic dimensions. Gender is the dominant dividing structure in the labour market and researchers and practitioners in the field of guidance have yet to take the influential gender variable into account in their work. Gender research, both within vocational psychology (Fassinger, 2005; Enns, 2000) and sociology (Bourdieu, 1998/2001) gives valuable insights into the effects of gender on career; but *habitus* has the advantage in research on occupational perceptions of being a variable that has gender at its roots but also includes other aspects of the social environment such as socio-economic status and choices of cultural goods.

Many guidance researchers who have been drawn to Bourdieu's *habitus* theory (Hodkinson, Sparkes, & Hodkinson, 1996; Colley, 2003; Artaraz, 2006; Guichard et al., 1994a, 1994b, 1994c) have been perplexed by how the individual chooses in a highly structured environment where gender, social class and stratified pattern of schooling are at play. Bourdieu's theory in guidance research can be divided into different approaches which for simplification I shall call the English school and the French school. The English approach is reflected in this quote from *Triumphs and tears*: "Differences in *habitus* influence the ways in which career choices are made as well as which options are considered" (Hodkinson, Sparkes, & Hodkinson, 1996, p. 149). Hence the English school addresses how to talk about choices for those who have few choices if any. Others here in the United Kingdom such as Colley (2003) and Artaraz (2006) use Bourdieu's theory to criticise over-simplifications in policy-making in guidance, where too much emphasis is placed on the free will of agents. They claim that the functioning of *habitus* is ignored in programmes such as *Connexions* which aim at social inclusion. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) have presented a model of career decision making called 'careership' and define a career decision making model that is midway between social determinism and free choice of individuals. This approach uses qualitative methods.

The French school is led by Jean Guichard and has Nordic adherents, for example in Finland and Iceland (Motola, 2001; Vilhjálmsdóttir & Arnkelsson, 2003; Vilhjálmsdóttir, 2004). The French focus is on research on the interplay between *habitus* and career-related factors such as the perception of occupations. This approach uses quantitative methods where the relationships between a measured

habitus and career-related variables are examined, whereas the English approach is qualitatively oriented. Although the foci of these two schools are somewhat different I am sure they could be combined in further research.

Short presentation of habitus theory

To present Bourdieu's theory very briefly I will use one of Bourdieu's own metaphors (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Society, which he labels *social space,* is compared to a hall full of card tables, each surrounded by people playing cards. People are playing games for a prize by written and unwritten rules. Each card table represents a *social field.* One might think that everyone is playing the same game, but in fact different games are played at different tables since the games have different stakes and different logics. The different card games represent the different fields in social space, such as the artistic field, religious field, economic field, academic field etc. Another concept in Bourdieu's theory is that of *illusio.* It is a socially embedded interest concept, referring to people being caught up in the game; believing that the game is worth playing.

To each card table or field people bring their capital, be it *cultural capital, symbolic capital* or *economic capital.* The notion of cultural capital is undoubtedly one of Bourdieu's best known concepts. Cultural capital is a form of value associated with culturally authorised tastes, consumption patterns, attributes, skills or awards. Within the field of education, for example, an academic degree constitutes cultural capital. Symbolic capital is a form of capital or value that is not recognised as such. Prestige and a glowing reputation, for example, operate as symbolic capital, because they mean nothing in themselves, but depend on people believing that someone possesses these qualities. For instance, famous people in Iceland who have symbolic capital at home may not have any in the United Kingdom. Finally, economic capital simply constitutes economic wealth.

Within this metaphor of society as a hall of games, *habitus* stands for the ability to play by the rules and recognise values in a certain field. This is usually acquired during upbringing. The son or daughter of an actor has the cultural capital of knowing many things about the theatre, and has even experienced acting at an early age. He or she will be more at ease in the field of the theatre and therefore be more likely to succeed within that field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Bourdieu was a structuralist and hence claimed that opposites are basic in all thinking. The opposites are the structures of meaning. Bourdieu was also a constructivist claiming that the oppositional structures are social in origin, thus referring to his work as *structuralist constructivism* (Bourdieu, 1990). According to Bourdieu, we embody the *habitus* as historical structures of the social order in the forms of unconscious schemes of perception and appreciation.

The cognitive structures of the *habitus* are shaped by similar environmental conditions and function as matrices of the perceptions, thoughts and actions of all members of society (Bourdieu 1998/2001). These social structures are part of the history of the social group we belong to, such as women performing womanly tasks or pursuing careers in female occupations. *Habitus* is both structured (by past social milieus) and structuring of present representations and actions. Bourdieu therefore defines *habitus* as a "structuring structure" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). It is a structure; i.e. a 'set of relations' by which the subject perceives and gives meaning to the world. The past history of one's social group, the *habitus,* is incorporated into one's whole body and being and orients choices and thinking of possible future moves (Bourdieu, 1980/1990). Objects of knowledge are constructed by the structuring structure. One important object of knowledge is the knowledge of an occupation which in turn is linked to the social structures such as the gender division of labour.

Habitus is also defined as a socialised subjectivity (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) a meaning-making structure that originates in one's social environment. How we perceive things and how we think is rooted in the social structure. Taste for cultural goods (such as books and music) and lifestyles, for example, is not based on free choice, but rather on the *habitus,* a way of thinking that is socially embedded (Bourdieu, 1979/1984).

Habitus is inculcated by experience more than direct learning and has to do with everyday matters, such as bodily postures, gestures and aesthetic choices. *Habitus* divides people into different social groups. Bourdieu studied *habitus* by studying people's judgements about things and their taste in art, music etc. It follows that what people hang up on their walls, the music they listen to, the books they read, their jokes or insults derive from their *habitus,* although they might seem to be the product of unfettered self–direction and individual purpose.

Bourdieu's method is based on classification of cultural consumption which he analyses with correspondence factor analysis, adopted by him in order to analyse relationships of social oppositions or practical taxonomies. The philosophy of correspondence factor analysis "corresponds exactly to what, in my view, the reality of the social world is. It is a technique which 'thinks' in terms of relation…" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 96). Correspondence factor analysis was also attractive to Bourdieu because he believed it allowed social space and social distances to be displayed visually (Bourdieu, 1990). Bourdieu used it to map the *habitus,* namely lifestyles and taste, within social space. Bourdieu used correspondence factor analysis to show how taste, choice of leisure and goods is distributed according to positions of power (be it symbolic, economic or cultural) within social space (Bourdieu, 1984).

Habitus and career choice

The notion of *habitus* accounts for people taking decisions reasonably without really being rational agents. A major function of *habitus* is what he calls the practical sense: a socially constituted 'sense of the game' that is at the basis of decision making. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). This means that people take sensible decisions without really thinking about them. Bourdieu supposes that anticipation towards the future is somehow inscribed in the current *habitus* in that:

> "[p]eople are 'pre-occupied' by certain future outcomes inscribed in the present they encounter only to the extent that their habitus sensitizes and mobilizes them to perceive and pursue them" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 26).

We perceive certain things or certain aspects of things in our environment, such as occupations, while being oblivious to others.

Change of habitus

It is important to remember that Bourdieu believes that *habitus* can and does change.
This happens mainly under two conditions. Firstly, *habitus* changes when a different social trajectory is entered, such as changing schools or school levels. Bourdieu himself is a good example of someone whose *habitus* changed via schooling because as a low class rural child he got grants and was educated in the best schools of his time. Somewhere he writes that schooling is a process of conversion for the lower classes. Secondly, *habitus* can change via socio–analysis, which is a reflection upon one's social origin and how it has affected one's life. Individual self construction occurs within structural social contexts or social fields, but the knowledge of how it happens or what he calls 'socio-analysis' makes it easier to change one's *habitus*.

Habitus and guidance research

Guichard and his associates (1994a, 1994b, 1994c) were the first, to my knowledge, to use the *habitus* concept in guidance research in 1994. Their sample counted nearly 600 adolescents, 17–18 years of age. Their studies, reported in a series of three articles, gave me the idea to explore *habitus* and occupational thinking in my country, Iceland. The study conducted was exploratory because it was uncertain whether *habitus* could be measured in an ethnically and socially homogeneous society such as the Icelandic one. At the outset, I was not sure that the *habitus* groups would form easily in a younger age group, than in the Guichard *et al.* study, and even when I did another study of an older age group, I was not sure the *habitus* groups could be found without difficulty. By studying two age groups, I have a comparison that can tell me if the structures found in the younger age group are still there in an older age group.

Below I shall present my findings on the *habitus* in two different age groups and how they relate to other social structures, such as gender, place of living, and social class. I will also show that gender and *habitus*, in particular, are reflected in occupational perceptions. I will begin by comparing gender differences in occupational perceptions between the two age groups. In order to show what *habitus* analysis adds to an analysis of gender differences, I will present results on *habitus* differences in the older age group. The research questions are:

1. Do *habitus* groups form readily with 15–16 year olds in their final year of compulsory education?
2. Do *habitus* groups form readily with 19–22 year olds in their final year of upper secondary education?
3. How do the *habitus* groups relate to other social variables such as gender, social class and place of living?
4. Are there gender differences in occupational perceptions in the two age groups?
5. Are there *habitus* differences in occupational perceptions?

Method

This study compares samples from two age groups that are in the final year of their school level. The first group of 883 participants (sample 1) is made up of 15-16 year olds (483 boys and 400 girls) in the final year of compulsory education. The sample was drawn from 26 schools in both urban and rural regions in 1996. The second group of 476 participants (sample 2) is made up of 19-22 year olds (μ =20.1) (225 men and 250 women). The sample in this second group was drawn from 25 upper secondary schools in six different educational programmes: trades and vocations (76), natural sciences (69), languages (102), social sciences (159), business (49), clerical, computers and information (21). The data in the second sample was collected in 2006. The two groups were chosen since they are both very close to important career decision points in the Icelandic school system.

Procedure

Data collection in the two groups was similar apart from the fact that items in the *habitus* measure were different due to the fact that the two groups differ in age, and since the data was collected with an interval of 10 years; time-bound items, such as listening to Britney Spears or playing computer games, were different. These are two cross–sectional studies on a similar subject.

Measures

The participants described their leisure activities by indicating their participation in 84 activities (sample 1) and 145 activities (sample 2); specifically, which titles they had read, musicians listened to, TV programmes watched etc. They were asked about specific items, such as if they listen to Nirvana, Metallica, Joanna Newsom, Björk etc.

Participants rated 11 occupations on 8 scales. The scales were seven-point bipolar scales anchored by a pair of adjectives: Interesting–not interesting, easy access (e.g. easy studies)–difficult access (e.g. hard studies), prestigious–not prestigious, masculine–feminine, great social utility–little social utility, low income–high income, little responsibility–much responsibility, little spare time–much spare time.

The following occupations were evaluated: car mechanic, electrician, engineer, lorry driver, nurse, physician, public school teacher, salesman, secretary, seaman and welder. Guichard et al. (1994) choose the nine occupations so that they would represent a wide spectrum of existing occupations as well as sampling both typically male and female occupations. The last two occupations were added to the set because those are prominent occupations in Iceland.

Analysis

In the two samples the cultural and leisure activities items were submitted to a factor analysis. An exploratory analysis with the k-means cluster algorithm resulted in a 5 cluster solution grouping together 5 groups of people in sample 1 and 4 groups of people in sample 2 who rated alike on the factors. A hierarchical cluster analysis determined the number of clusters in the leisure activities declared. Correspondence factor analysis was performed to show how the habitus groups relate to other social variables.

Correspondence analysis revealed that two scales, gender type (masculine/feminine) and prestige (prestigious–not prestigious) explain most of the variance in the occupational variables or have the highest inertia. On these grounds, I will concentrate on the gender and prestige scales in the analysis of the results.

Results

The adolescents distinguish themselves by listening to certain music, doing certain types of sports etc. In doing so they are showing their habitus. In both groups the habitus groups formed readily. The clusters are given names by their most prominent features. The groups in the younger sample are:

I. Music listeners.
II. Classical music and poetry.
III. Feminine.
IV. Sports and films.
V. Science and literature.

I. **Music listeners**. The young people in this group listen to all kinds of music and are not selective like some of the other groups. This might suggest that they are passive. They reject science and literature.

II. **Classical music and poetry**. This group is very selective in its music and literature taste. Its members listen to classical music and jazz, read poetry and non–fiction books. 40% play a musical instrument, which is significantly more than in three other groups.
III. **Feminine**. This group watches TV soap operas such as Guiding Light and My So Called Life, its members read love stories and fashion magazines, practise aerobics and go swimming, listen to Oasis and Michael Bolton.
IV. **Sports and films**. This group is active in sports and in going to films and consists mainly of boys (76%).
V. **Science and literature**. This is a group where the young people do some sports but are very active in science and literature. They watch scientific documentaries on TV, read comic books, science fiction, computer magazines, novels, sagas and all sorts of literature.

When the habitus groups are differentiated on gender, place of living and class of parents, we get a good description of each cluster. This relationship between social variables and habitus groups is shown in the CFA map (figure 1). Correspondence factor analysis can simply be described as displaying graphically very large contingency tables (hundreds of cells). For example in figure 1 most people in habitus group 2 are boys from urban areas and upper classes. This analysis validates the habitus concept since the habitus groups are formed out of leisure variables (not from the variables social class, gender or place of living), but the habitus groups are not independent of the three social variables. Belonging to different habitus groups is reflected in different patterns of socio–economic status, place of living and gender. Habitus is strongly related to these major social variables, even though only choice of leisure activity was the variable in the habitus.

**Figure 1: Habitus groups vs social variables in age group: 15–16**
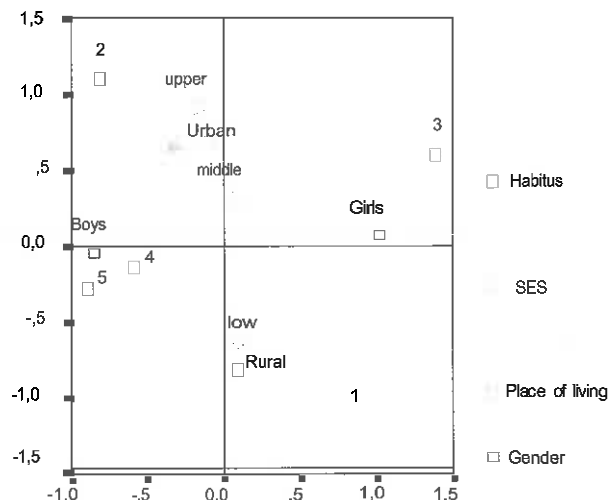
In the sample with young people aged 19–22 the *habitus* groups formed readily and were as follows:

I. Arts
II. Feminine
III. Inactive (active in computer games)
IV. Sports and movies

I. **Arts.** This group selects both classical films and films that do not originate in the US. This group reads a lot, especially books on art and culture. They listen to classical music, jazz, indie and alternative pop. This group has learned to play musical instruments, paints and writes poetry.

II. **Feminine.** This group watches soap operas on television and watches fashion shows on television. They listen to fashionable pop music such as Britney Spears and Pink. This group does sport regularly, swimming, jogging and works out at the gym.

III. **Inactive.** This group is not active in any special activity apart from computer games and board games. They have played musical instruments at some time but don't do that any longer.

IV. **Sports and movies.** This group listens to heavy rock, rock, britpop and rap. They watch comedy and technical programmes on TV, as well as sports and news. This group watches all kinds of films, but only from North America.

Figure 2 shows a map derived from correspondence factor analysis for this sample. As before the four *habitus* groups are closely linked to gender, place of living and social class. The same structure appears where choice and practice of leisure activities reflects a certain social status. Again the *habitus* concept is validated.

Figure 2. Habitus groups vs social variables in age group: 19–22
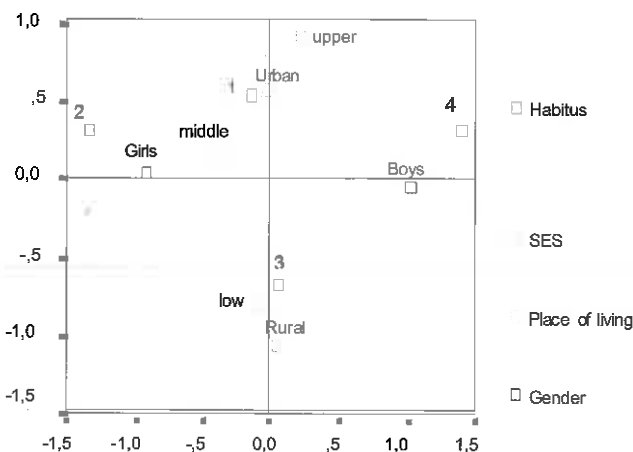
Gender is a basic dimension in *habitus*. Therefore I will first present to you a map based on gender differences in perceiving occupations. It will serve as a basis for understanding *habitus* differences in occupational

perceptions. Correspondence analysis of occupational perceptions (not shown here) revealed two dimensions that explain most of the variance on the occupational variables (highest inertia). The two dimensions are gender type of the occupation and prestige. Therefore results are only presented on these two scales, even though information was collected on 8 scales in all. How do young men and women view occupations? As can be seen in figure 3, girls and boys in sample 1 have very similar perceptions of the male occupations on the left side of the map, but not the female occupations shown on the right side of the map. We see a structure where perceptions of feminine occupations are clearly different according to gender.

Figure 3. Gender differences in occupational thinking: age 15–16
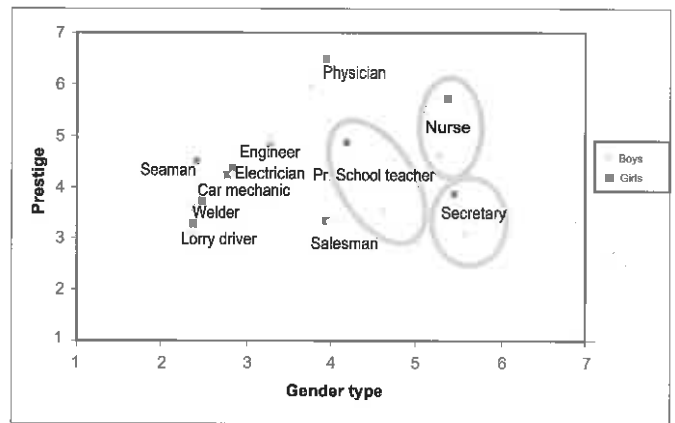
When analysing the data in sample 2 last summer I was very interested to see if the same structure of gender differences in perceiving female occupations would be seen in an older sample, or if with maturity this had changed. But no, in the same way as the boys, young men find female professions less prestigious (when compared with girls and women) and they also find the female professions more feminine (with the exception of the primary school teacher), than did the younger boys. The mapping of men and women in the older sample is shown in figure 4.

Figure 4. Gender differences in occupational thinking: age 19–22
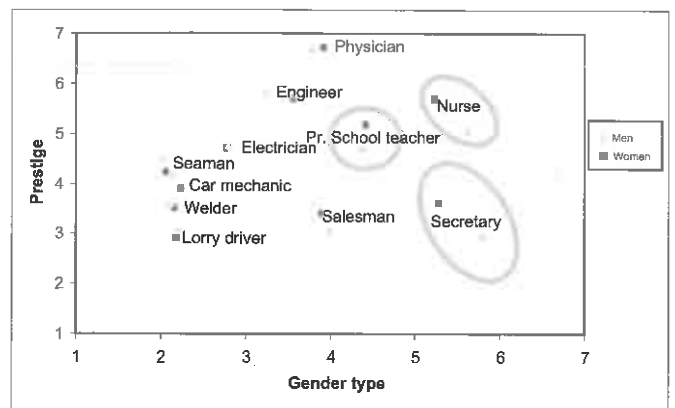
When comparing the graphs in figure 3 and figure 4 it is interesting to see that in fact there is not much change between the two graphs; men and boys hold 'female' occupations in lower esteem than do girls and women. It can be argued that we are looking here at the gender divide in the thinking of occupations.

Next we shall look at *habitus* differences in occupational thinking. Since the composition in the four *habitus* groups in the sample of 19–22 year olds are opposite on the two dimensions of gender and prestige and since analysis of this data is preliminary at this point, differences in occupational thinking are presented by opposing groups 2 (feminine) and 4 (sports and movies) (that were opposite on the feminine masculine dimension in figure 2) and groups 1 (arts) and 3 (inactive) (that were opposite on the social class dimension in figure 2).

Figure 5. Habitus differences in occupational thinking: Groups 2 (feminine) and 4 (sports and movies) age 19–22
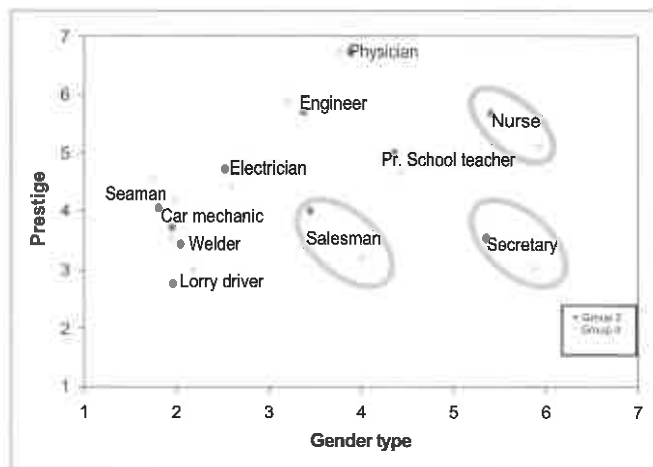
When we look at this map in figure 5 comparing group 2, the feminine group, to group 4, the group that is mainly composed of boys (94%) we see that the feminine group finds the salesperson a more prestigious occupation than girls in general in the sample. A possible explanation could be that girls in this group do more shopping than girls in general and hold salespersons in higher esteem.

Figure 6 compares an axis of groups on opposite social economic status. Group 1 the arts group is of higher social origin and ranks the traditional female professions higher on the prestige scale. What is also interesting is that they have a more gender equalitarian view of the professions. They, for example perceive the electrician as nearly gender neutral, whereas the inactive group, (that comes mostly from a lower origin) view that profession and the seaman as more male and the secretary as more female. In the same manner the inactive group perceive the occupations of nurse and secretary as being more feminine. This group uses the feminine – masculine scale more to differentiate between occupations.

Figure 6. Habitus differences in occupational thinking: Comparison of groups 1 (arts) and 3 (inactive) age 19–22
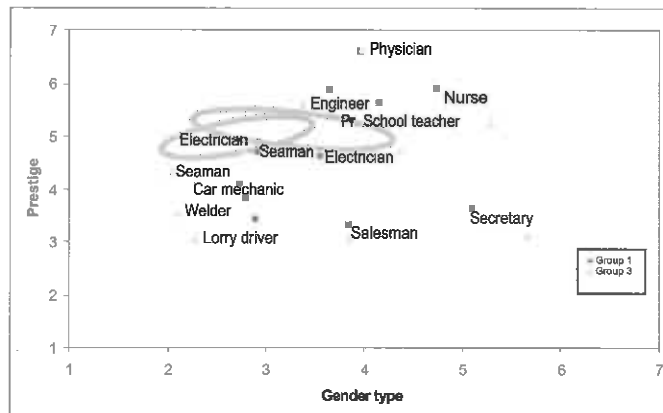
Conclusion

We have seen that *habitus* groups form readily with 15 to 16 year olds in their final year of compulsory education. They also form readily with 19 to 22 year olds in their final year of upper secondary education. In addition, the *habitus* concept is validated, since *habitus* groups related strongly to social variables of gender, class and place of living.

By measuring leisure and culture variables, distinct groups can be found in young and late adolescence. Their choice of activities is socially embedded, as well as their thinking on occupations since both gender and *habitus* differences in occupational thinking have been detected. This shows that in *habitus* analysis and *habitus* theory we are looking at phenomena that are strongly linked with aspects of career, such as occupational thinking. The groups construe the reality of leisure activities in a different way, and they also construe occupations differently.

There are indications that *habitus* analysis is telling us more about occupational perception and career preferences than gender and social variables together. There are gender differences in occupational perceptions and they are similar in the two age groups. In both age groups the same pattern is revealed of boys having less respect for women's occupations. Moreover, *habitus* analysis reveals more distinction on occupational perceptions than is visible when comparing boys and girls or young men and women. Feminine girls hold salespersons in higher esteem than do girls in general and people of higher socio-economic status are more egalitarian in evaluating the femininity or masculinity and prestige of an occupation.

In counselling practice this means that counsellors need to be aware of these social mechanisms (know their own *habitus* – do their own socio–analysis) and be prepared to inform their clients about these social mechanisms. This means that counsellors need to inform themselves about cultural items that are very differentiating within the youth culture, know about Foo Fighters, computer games etc.

Counsellors can be out of sync with the *habitus* of young people, which means that this important part of reality of the young person could be disregarded in the counselling relationship.

Four main *habitus* groups were detected in the sample of the age group of 19–22 years of age and a similar pattern had been found previously with a younger age group. The four groups have different proportions of men and women on the one hand and people from higher or lower social status on the other hand. People can change *habitus* groups, especially in youth and adolescence when important changes take place in schooling. It would be interesting to explore such changes further in future research. A better understanding of changes in *habitus*, whether they are a result of socio-analysis, changes in schooling or of other causes, can help us to understand further the relationship between cultural items people cherish and the way we perceive occupations.

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