Strategy as Practice and Pierre Bourdieu’s social praxeology
Structure of the presentation

Introduction to Bourdieu theory of practical reason

a) What is the theory about? Where does it come from?
b) Why does it matter?

Implications for Strategy as Practice Research
Human reason is socially bounded

Individuals are endowed with cognitive instruments which are structured (not determined) by the world and which contribute to construct the world.

Our strategies, our view of the world are socially bounded (in contrast with Simon’s focus on the biological limitations of human reason).
An empirical observation

Agents are capable of being reflective but at the same time seem to follow some rules, plans without engaging in a discursive reflection.
On one hand boxers and coaches contend that boxing is a **thinking man’s game**. It is often compared with chess. On the other hand they maintain that **thinking is not something to be done on the ring**.

DeeDee Armour, Coach at Woodlawn

DeeDee’s student
Muhammad Ali

“Ain’t no place for thinkin’ in the ring: It’s all reflex!”

“When it’s time to think it’s time to quit”

“Boxing is brain over brawn. I don’t care how much ability you’ve got as a fighter. If you can’t think, you’re just another bum in the park”
Why are our views socially bounded?

Through practice and confrontation with their environments agents (including academics…) develop a sense of the right opinion a sense of orientation (a *habitus*).

Events happen in sequence (a bit like in a boxing game). Reflection is limited.
Development of the Pugilistic habitus

The METHOD

The most striking character of the workout is its repetitive, denuded, ascetic quality: its different phases are repeated day after day, week after week with only barely perceptible variations.

The COACH

Pieces of advices distilled parsimoniously and intermittently (...) thoroughly pleonastic with reality and consist, in most cases, of abbreviated and negative remarks (...).

The RESULT

The body of the fighter computes and judge for him, instantaneously, without the mediation and costly delay that it would cause of abstract thinking prior representation and strategic calculation.
Controversies around this view

If one focuses on the idea of freedom ("I am mostly aware of what I am doing"). One ends up with an imaginary anthropology (of absolute freedom) in which we are aware of all the assumptions we make and all the conventions we follow.

Very tempting for academics who sole occupation is to reflect, especially on other people’s actions (A good example of a socially bounded view).
Controversies around this view

If one is content with the idea that agents behave “AS-IF” they were mechanically following some rules.

This can result in a poor understanding of the conditions of validity of existing models.
How Can Bourdieu’s social praxeology contribute to Strategy as Practice?

A Methodological Proposition
How Can Bourdieu can contribute to Strategy-as-practice?

**Strategy-as-practice**

- Close-up observation of agents is the main focus of Strategy-as-practice.

- Understand what conditions the practice of agents. Construct variables. Statistical analysis of regularities. (Whittington mentions the use of statistical studies and refers to Bourdieu)

- Understands what conditions the practice of the observer! **Participant Objectivation**
Participant objectivation explained

“Nothing is more false than the maxim almost universally accepted in the social sciences according to which the researcher must put nothing of himself into his research.”

“He should on the contrary refer continually to his own experience but not as it is too often the case, even among the best researchers in a guilty, unconscious or controlled manner.”
Participant observation put in practice

It is not about observing the observer observing.

So what does it mean?

Uncover the distortion and presupposition of his object of study through the examination of

• The Social origin and trajectory, age, gender of the observer

• But most importantly, the particular position within the microcosm of the academic field: national traditions, constraints in matter of publication, shared assumptions, common places etc…
Participant objectivation method

This turn-around is not effected in a day through a sudden illumination. It involves many returns.
Summary

Human reason is socially bounded but not in the biological sense of the term.

It is important, difficult and necessary to examine what can conditions the activity of agents (those who strategise) but also our observations.
Some References


Bourdieu, a critical reader. Edited by Richard Shusterman. 1999

Documentary: Sociology is a Martial Art by Pierre Carles. (First Run Icarus Films, New-York)

The Logic of Practice, Polity Press. 1990 [1980] (one of Bourdieu’s masterpiece. quite demanding but very rewarding).

Homo-Academicus, Polity Press. Analysis of an academic field. 1988