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# Honors in Practice (Theory): A Bourdieusian Perspective on the Professionalization of Honors

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**Abstract:** Patricia J. Smith's essay on the professionalization of honors advances several original and provocative arguments that deserve serious consideration. Although Smith makes a plausible case that honors has fulfilled at least three of Theodore Caplow's four stages of professionalization, a closer reading of this text reveals that the developments identified by Smith fail to satisfy the basic functions that each stage serves on the path toward professionalism. This essay argues that honors has little incentive to become a distinct profession because much of its highly skilled workforce enjoys the protection of occupational closure as college faculty and administrators. The author proposes an alternative sociological framework, inspired by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, for investigating past and present social dynamics of honors education. Key concepts of Bourdieu's theory of practice (*field*, *illusio*, *doxa*, and *habitus*) are defined and applied to the context of honors.

**Keywords:** Bourdieu, Pierre, 1930–2002; professionalism; occupational closure; Caplow, Theodore, 1920–2015; practice theory (social sciences)

## INTRODUCTION

Patricia J. Smith's essay provides a valuable contribution to ongoing debates over whether honors education should be considered a discipline, a field, a specialization, or something else. Drawing on the work of American sociologist Theodore Caplow, Smith proposes that honors is (or is on its way to becoming) a profession. She supports her provocative claim by connecting developments in the history of honors to the four stages of professionalization

outlined by Caplow. My forum response has two primary goals: to assess the validity of Smith's argument by evaluating how well honors fits Caplow's model of professionalization and to sketch an alternative sociological framework for investigating honors inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice.

## REEVALUATING THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF HONORS

In the sociology of work, *profession* describes a specific type of occupation that entails extensive educational credentialing, mastery of a specialized body of knowledge, the power to define problems and solutions in an area of expertise, and a sense of solidarity and collective purpose among its members (Volti, 2012; Evetts, 2013). Although college faculty have long been recognized as prototypical professionals, Smith asserts that "the time has come to examine honors education as a profession itself" distinct from traditional academic disciplines and specializations.

Since the strength of Smith's argument largely rests on whether honors has actually fulfilled Caplow's stages of professionalization, understanding the full context of each stage in his framework is essential. Smith posits that the first stage—"the establishment of a professional association with definite membership criteria" (Caplow, 1954, p. 139)—was satisfied with the formation of the Inter-University Committee of the Superior Student (ICSS) in 1957 and the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) in 1966. While NCHC is indeed a professional association with membership criteria, Caplow further specifies that a primary function of these organizations is to "keep out the unqualified" (ibid.). Since NCHC extends membership to any administrator and faculty or staff member from an accredited institution of higher education, regardless of their affiliation with an honors program or college (as well as affiliate membership for those not associated with any institution), it would not appear to satisfy a crucial aspect of this stage (NCHC, Member Eligibility).

We find a similar issue in Smith's connection of Caplow's second stage—"the change of name" (Caplow, 1954, p. 139)—with the rise of honors colleges. While there is undoubtedly a name change when an honors program becomes an honors college, this institutional transformation fails to fulfill any of Caplow's expressed purposes of this stage, including "reducing identification with the previous occupational status, asserting a technological monopoly, and providing a title which can be monopolized" (ibid.). For example, honors colleges hardly enjoy a monopoly over the term "honors" in higher education, which also (to the confusion of many students) refers to

Latin honors given at Commencement as well as scholastic honors societies like Alpha Chi or Phi Beta Kappa.

Smith views Caplow's third stage—"the development and promulgation of a code of ethics" (Caplow, 1954, p. 139)—as fulfilled by the documents outlining the basic characteristics of fully developed honors programs and colleges, first approved by NCHC in 1994 and 2005, respectively (NCHC, Basic Characteristics). Although it is debatable whether these best practices are properly ethical in nature, they could be plausibly seen as fulfilling one purpose of this stage: "to eliminate the unqualified and unscrupulous" (ibid.). On the other hand, these documents do not impose "a real and permanent limitation on internal competition" because (as Smith admits) NCHC holds no authority to enforce these guidelines or sanction noncompliant programs.

This issue of certification is crucial to Caplow's fourth stage of professionalization: "prolonged political agitation, whose object it is to obtain the support of the public power for the maintenance of new occupational barriers" (Caplow, 1954, p. 139). Possible strategies for achieving this goal include a required licensing exam, the development of training facilities controlled by the professional society, or the passage of laws ensuring that only the appropriately credentialed are allowed to conduct this work. For Smith, recent debates over the certification of honors programs indicate that honors is moving toward this final stage of professionalization, and she predicts that "the issue is likely to arise again in the future since it goes to the heart of NCHC's mission and the nature of honors education."

Setting aside the question of whether enforced certification of honors programs and colleges is a prudent idea, I believe any such efforts would prove largely ineffective since honors has not satisfied the main purpose of any of Caplow's prior stages. I would further argue that honors is not, in fact, becoming a profession because there is no incentive to erect the kinds of occupational barriers that form a central goal of professionalization (Bol and Weeden, 2015). In professional sectors like medicine, law, and engineering, high-skilled workers seek to enlist the power of the state to enforce barriers in the market that give them monopoly control over their sector of work—a process sociologists call "occupational closure" (Volti, 2012, p. 158–60). But in the case of honors, most of this workforce already benefits from occupational closure in their role as college faculty or administrators. They are trained and credentialed within traditional academic disciplines and gain employment at accredited institutions of higher education. Although Smith correctly points out that some honors colleges now grant tenure, promotion and job security

for the vast majority of honors educators will continue to be based on criteria established by their home disciplines and departments.

Since honors is already protected within the policed boundaries of higher education, it has no meaningful competitors in the way that allopathic physicians have to contend with alternative medicine or the way colleges and universities use accrediting bodies to distinguish themselves from fraudulent diploma mills. The only segment of the honors community likely to move toward professionalization in the foreseeable future would be staff (e.g., program managers, administrative assistants, or assistant directors) who do not enjoy the same level of job security as faculty. It is far easier to imagine specialized training or certification programs emerging in this area than a doctoral program in honors education.

## HONORS THROUGH THE LENS OF PRACTICE THEORY

While I disagree with Smith's claim that honors is becoming a profession, there is still value in her underlying insight that the historical trajectory and future direction of honors should be investigated through a sociological lens. The problem with Caplow's framework is that it does not provide a sufficiently robust and flexible analytical toolkit for exploring the complex dynamics at play in the contemporary landscape of honors education. I believe a more promising theoretical model is found in the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, whose theory of practice has not only produced one of the seminal ethnographic studies of academic life (Bourdieu, 1988) but also provides an instructive critique of the mainstream scholarship on professionalism (Schinkel & Noordegraaf, 2011). Bourdieu himself criticized the category of profession as "a folk concept which has been uncritically smuggled into scientific language and which imports into it a whole range of social unconscious" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 242). He argued that studies of professionalism have been premised upon a set of implicit assumptions and predetermined concepts that themselves demand ethnographic investigation. From a Bourdieusian perspective, ongoing debates regarding the ontological status of honors are asking the wrong question. Rather than worrying about what honors is (a discipline, a profession, etc.), we should focus on what honors does and how it works. With this in mind, I conclude by briefly considering how a theory of practice could fruitfully explore the social topology of honors education.

Practice theory offers a powerful analytical toolkit for investigating social phenomena. In this framework, the most useful concept for conceptualizing

the community of honors is *field*, defined as a network or configuration of relationships among agents and institutions where the agents vie for access to species of capital (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 96). Agents in honors would include faculty, staff, administrators, and even students who compete for economic, social, and symbolic capital by participating in honors conferences, institutes, and other events, publishing in honors journals and monographs, vying for awards and grants, running for executive office or standing committees, and applying for ever-more prestigious leadership roles (directorships, deanships, etc.). Institutions include not only the national and regional honors associations but also individual programs and colleges, as well as national honors societies, study abroad companies, and the other vendors that line the hallways of annual meetings. Because practice theory recognizes that agents and institutions can be part of multiple *fields* simultaneously and that *fields* are often overlapping and hierarchical, it could better account for the place of honors within higher education than Caplow's framework.

Bourdieu often described the concept of *field* as a game in which players obey a set of (mostly unwritten) rules, but such a game only works if all players agree that it is worth playing. This shared sense of meaning is captured in the concept of *illusio*, the "tacit recognition of the values of the stakes of the game and . . . practical mastery of its rules" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 116). Emerging from this underlying purpose are a range of fundamental beliefs (*doxa*) inherent to an agent's belonging in a *field* (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 67). Examples of such beliefs in the honors community include the notion that certain kinds of undergraduate students (the honors student, however defined) deserve and benefit from a special kind of curricular and co-curricular experience, the idea that honors education should be elite but not elitist, and the belief that diversity (in various forms) enhances rather than detracts from an honors education. Just as the loss of *illusio* would lead to a player's dropping out of the game, so too would challenging doxastic logic likely result in an agent's social ostracization from the *field*.

Finally, no account of practice theory would be complete without discussing its most widely known term, *habitus*, which Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 126) pithily defined as "socialized subjectivity." In other words, *habitus* seeks to explain how our everyday embodied actions shape, and are shaped by, the structure of the *fields* in which we participate. For honors educators, such actions might include the way we teach and mentor students, our interactions with fellow faculty, the policies we develop for our programs and associations, our advocacy of honors within our institutions and

communities, and innumerable other routines and rituals that we engage in on a daily basis. The task of the ethnographer is to determine which of these behaviors are most important and reveal hidden insights about the nature and inner workings of our *field*.

Bourdieu saw the central goal of social science research as exploring the interplay between *habitus* and *field* as well as everything born of this relation (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 127). A practice approach to honors would carefully study how the *habitus* of agents is shaped by *illusio*, *doxa*, and distribution of capital within the *field* as well as how the *field* of honors emerges from the collective actions of agents. Many interesting research questions could be explored from this perspective: How does the meaning and purpose of "honors" vary among faculty, staff, and students at different kinds of institutions (public vs. private; large vs. small; highly competitive vs. open admission)? How are fundamental honors values (*doxa*) instilled in new members of the community, and how (and why) have they shifted over time? What structural forces are driving the desire for certification or enforced standardization of honors programs and colleges? How do honors leaders balance the goals of meritocracy and equality in their daily decision making? Is honors education complicit in the widening socioeconomic inequalities driven by the reproduction of cultural capital within the "aspirational class" (see Currid-Halkett, 2017)?

Of course, to address such complex and nuanced questions would require nothing less than a robust, multiyear *field* project grounded in participant-observation, historical research, quantitative data analysis, and in-depth interviews with various stakeholders. The only study (of which I am aware) to have explored research questions similar to those outlined above mentioned some of Bourdieu's concepts (e.g., *habitus* and cultural capital) but did not fully adopt a practice approach (Galinova, 2005). I hope that this short essay has sketched out what a sociological study of honors might look like from a Bourdieusian perspective and has highlighted its potential for transcending futile debates over whether honors is a discipline or profession by unpacking the social dynamics and paradoxes at the heart of this unique academic community.

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