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# From the habitus to an individual heritage of dispositions. Towards a sociology at the level of the individual

Bernard Lahire\*

*Ecole Normale Supérieure Lettres et Sciences Humaines, 15 parvis René descartes, BP 7000,  
69342 Lyon Cedex, France*

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## Abstract

It is argued that the notions sociologists use to conceptualize psychological processes occurring at the level of social groups capitalize too strongly on the idea that these processes are general and homogeneous in nature. In particular, the notion of ‘disposition’, which is central to Bourdieu’s theory of the habitus and which is widely employed in sociological research, is found to rest upon these tacit and problematic assumptions which have never been tested empirically. Instead, we should envision that social agents have developed a broad array of dispositions, each of which owes its availability, composition, and force to the socialization process in which it was acquired. In particular, a distinction should be made between dispositions to act and dispositions to believe. Moreover, the intensity with which dispositions affect behavior depends also on the specific context in which social agents interact with one another. A focus on the plurality of dispositions and on the variety of situations in which they manifest themselves is at the core of a sociology at the level of the individual. Its research program conceives of individuals as being products of pluriform social processes occurring in very different domains. It focuses on social factors that may account for behavioral variations and changes rather than for irreducible differences between social groups.

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Although it has, in order to constitute itself, to reject all the forms of that biologism which always tend to naturalize social differences by reducing them to

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\* Tel.: +33-4-3737-6176.

E-mail address: [bernard.lahire@univ-lyon2.fr](mailto:bernard.lahire@univ-lyon2.fr) (B. Lahire).

anthropological invariants, sociology can understand the social game in its most essential aspect only if it takes into account certain of the universal characteristics of bodily existence, such as the fact of existing as a separate biological individual or as being confined to a place and a moment, or even the fact of being and knowing oneself destined for death, so many more than scientifically attested properties which never come into the axiomatics of positivist anthropology. (P. Bourdieu, *Leçon sur la leçon*).

### 1. Are there objects that are more social in nature than others?

Where and how can we determine what is social in nature? This question has always been a major concern for researchers in the social sciences; it has garnered a great diversity of answers, depending on the particular traditions to which researchers have subscribed. Are there objects that are specific to the social sciences? A realist theory of knowledge would lead us to think that certain objects in the world are particularly ‘social’ in nature while others are so to a lesser degree, or not at all. Consequently, collective movements, groups, classes, and institutions ‘evidently’ belong to the realm of the social sciences, whereas the behavior of single individuals, neuroses, depressions, dreams, emotions, or technical objects that surround us should be investigated by psychological sociologists, psychologists, psychoanalysts, physicians, engineers, or ergonomists. However, it is well known that in practice researchers have given short shrift to such realist boundaries. Indeed, as Saussure has forcefully argued, it is the perspective that creates the object; it is an error to suppose that objects are so kind to wait for a particular scientific point of view that will reveal their true nature.

The social sciences will progress towards increasing scientific autonomy only if they do not exclude a priori any topic from their domain of study. Like the ‘purest’ forms of literature show their separation from external demands by asserting that modes of representation have priority over what is represented, the social sciences should demonstrate that there are no empirical limits to what they are capable of examining, i.e., that there are no objects which, by nature, are more socio-logical, anthropo-logical, or historical than others, but that the *scientific (sociological, anthropological, or historical) mode of dealing with* these objects is essential.<sup>1</sup>

However, it is not all easy to achieve such cognitive extensions of the objects a scientific discipline is capable of investigating. In the majority of cases, it will prove impossible to apply in a mechanical way concepts or methods whose proven merits go back a long way in time to new themes or topics. For this reason, such topics will appear to be much more resistant than a nominalist theory of knowledge might

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<sup>1</sup> For example, sociology would make significant progress if it did not remain at the outskirts of classical work done in psychology. Therefore, it is not fruitful to stick to the study of the social and historical perception of mental illness, or of the social and institutional trajectories of mental illnesses; the task that should be undertaken is the analysis of the social production of mental illness.

suggest. Applying old interpretive schemes to new realities may simply reinforce the belief that a given discipline is intrinsically incapable of examining such realities. Sociologists also run another risk in taking interpretive schemes from other branches of knowledge that bear no relationship to the development of their own discipline. Such borrowings are not rightful, since they are not controlled.

## 2. Understanding what is social and also individual in nature

Two permanent risks threaten our understanding of the individual forms taken by what is social in nature: first, the belief that the new topic can be examined by simply recycling old concepts and methods; second, the illusion that one can achieve one's scientific aims by tinkering with a form of sociology that shows an incongruous mixture of elements of sociological and of psychological origin.

We will disregard here the second risk (which, in the 1970s, led to unsuccessful efforts at combining Marxism with psychoanalysis), because going into it would require a long discussion of the fallacies of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research (Lahire, 1998: 227–229). The first risk has escaped researchers to a large extent. Lowering the level of generality at which social phenomena are analyzed—from the level of groups, movements, structures, or institutions to the level of single individuals who 'live within' and at the same time 'constitute' such higher order entities—has not been a brutal operation. It has not challenged the view researchers used to adopt nor has it caused them difficulties favoring an awareness of the change. The change has gone unnoticed and, for this reason, has strongly impeded the exercise of theoretical lucidity. Without realizing it and without assessing its consequences, sociologists have become interested in socialized individuals *as such* in conducting case studies or studies presenting among other types of 'data' individual portraits which derive their methodological support from the traditions of life histories or in-depth interviews; at the same time, they have remained interested in groups, categories, structures, institutions, or situations regardless of their size or type. The change would have been more visible if researchers had not grown accustomed to claiming that their findings are relevant, regardless of the level at which they are made. Such levels range from the global social field to the single individual (Lahire, 1996).

The writings of Pierre Bourdieu have identified and characterized within the framework of a specific theory these 'small machines' producing practices (in a broad sense of the word), these 'matrices' storing the products of past experiences in the body of every individual. These theoretical models would seem satisfactory if their notions (and their counterparts in the real world) of cognitive, psychological, or mental structures, schemes, dispositions, habitus, embodiment, and internalization did not have a key position, but were only necessary, in reporting on surveys, to account for particular practices by giving a global idea of how past socialization is stored in the body. The terms borrowed from psychology (from Piaget, in particular) could be used to denote a gap between the objective structures of the social world and the practices of individuals. In this way, the habitus could be a charac-

teristic of groups as well as of individuals. No particular problem would arise then; no one would really pay attention, since the theory did not envision the empirical study of these realities. This would largely suffice for a sociologist to pursue his profession, and, without doubt, it would still suffice today for a large group of researchers. Numerous sociologists continue to practice their profession without feeling any need to give a name to the (cognitive, sensitive, valuative, ideological, cultural, mental, psychological, etc.) corporal matrices of behaviors, actions, and reactions. Certain authors even hold that such notions as ‘socialization’ and ‘habitus’ typically are ‘black boxes’ which should have no place at all within a scientific and explanatory sociology (Boudon, 1998).

Discussing mental structures, schemes, dispositions, habitus or embodiment necessarily entails the risk that other researchers will pay attention and make critical comments. If we have become familiar with a particular set of terms, should this make us believe that we know exactly what a disposition, a scheme, a system of dispositions, or a formula that generates practices is? Should we not ask ourselves whether some of these terms impose specific ways of seeing on us, which might deserve critical analysis? In universalizing the accomplishments of the psychology of his time, parts of which still retain their validity, Pierre Bourdieu committed psychology to clinging to a set of concepts which have become petrified and have hardly changed in 30 years, but which—like all scientific concepts—were nothing but a kind of summary of what was at that time the most advanced psychological research into the development of children. Rather than assuming the existence of a socio-cognitive process such as ‘transferability’ (or ‘transposability’), should we not treat it as a problem to be settled by empirical research aiming to *systematically compare* social dispositions activated according to specific contexts, i.e., domains of practices, spheres of activity, micro contexts, types of interaction, etc? Does not the simple use of the singular in expressions such as ‘generative formula’ and ‘generative and unifying principle’ of practices or behaviors suggest that a problem is solved before it even has been posed and, at least in part, before an empirical solution has been proposed? Facing these questions opens the way to a *sociology at the level of the individual*, which, step by step, was made possible by part of the scientific community. I will proceed now to detail its scientific program (Lahire, 1998, 2002).

The study of the social in its individualized form, i.e. the social refracted in an individual body that, characteristically, passes through institutions, groups, and fields of power and of struggles or different scenes, is the study of social reality in its embodied and internalized form. How does external reality, which is more or less heterogeneous in nature, become embodied? How do the manifold experiences which contribute to the process of socialization (co)exist in one and the same body? How do such experiences install themselves more or less durably in every body and how do they intervene at different times in social life or in an individual’s life? As long as sociologists want to shed light on groups of individuals on the basis of a practice or of a specific domain of practices—employees of a corporation, partners, readers, users of a given cultural institution, voters, etc.—there is no need to study these individualized social logics. However, when the focus is on individuals, not as atoms that are the basic elements of sociological analysis but as complex products of

multiple processes of socialization, it is no longer possible to remain confined to relying on explicit or implicit models of actors, action, and cognition which have been current until now. The micro-historian Giovanni Levi (1989: 1335) has rightly stated that “we cannot (...) apply the same cognitive procedures to groups and individuals alike.”

### 3. The life of dispositions

Developing a sociology at the individual level implies that the notion of ‘disposition’ must be examined. Taking a close look at the way in which this notion is used in sociological studies, it does not take long to realize that, until now, it has been of little importance to the analysis of the social world. Sociologists have rarely improved their knowledge of the social world by a customary use of this concept. For example, when Bourdieu (1979: 17) explains that there is no practice that classifies more strongly than attending a concert or playing a ‘noble’ musical instrument because of the “rarity of the conditions under which the corresponding dispositions are acquired”, this assertion pertains to the distinctive function of certain cultural practices, i.e., to their rarity, but it does not inform us about the nature of the dispositions ‘corresponding’ to these practices. The same point can be made about Bourdieu’s assertion that the literary works of Mallarmé and Zola each bears the mark of the “socially constituted dispositions of its author” (Bourdieu, 1979: 19). The interested reader feels fully ‘disposed’ to believe this, but no analysis is undertaken of the dispositions of these authors, of what is to be understood exactly by ‘dispositions’, or of the way in which the presumed dispositions may be reconstructed. Are authors’ social dispositions, in so far as these are relevant to the understanding of their work, general in nature and acquired through socialization in the family? Or are these dispositions particular outcomes of literary socialization? In this case, not all experiences authors had during the process of socialization are relevant to their ‘literary behavior’.

Regarding the contexts in which the notion of ‘disposition’ is used in *La distinction*, we are continually led to ask ourselves such questions. Sometimes the term is used in a specific manner, when Bourdieu refers to kinds of dispositions by using nouns and qualifying modifiers without becoming more precise: “the cultivated disposition”, “ordinary dispositions and the properly aesthetic disposition”, “the moralism of the petty bourgeois”, “the regressive and repressive dispositions of the fractions of the petty bourgeoisie that are on the decline”, “the pure disposition”, “the dispositions constituting the cultivated habitus”, “the ascetic virtues and cultural good-will of the petty bourgeois who are paid workers”, “the disposition appealed to by legitimate works of art”, “the ascetic dispositions of individuals who climb on the social ladder”, “the ascetic aristocratism of the dominated fractions of the dominating class”, “the hygienist hedonism of physicians and modern higher employees”, “an austere disposition of the kind that is acquired at school”, “the hedonist morals of consumption”, “the ascetic morals of production”, “optimist progressivism”, “pessimistic conservatism”, “a scholarly, even erudite disposition”,

“the distant, detached or casual disposition towards the world and other people”, “dispositions and manners held to be characteristic of the bourgeois”, the “realist hedonism” of the popular classes, “the political conservatism disposition”, “the liberal conservatism of the fractions of the dominating class”, “reactionary dispositions”, “ethical snobbery”, “the dispositions of performers”.

Elsewhere, the notion may enter the general economy of theoretical reasoning: “the mode of perception that puts a particular disposition and a particular competence into action”, “the *differential experiences* consumers make in function of dispositions they owe to their position in the economic field”, “class-specific habitus as an embodied form of conditions which are specific of social classes and the conditioning it imposes”, “their properties which may become embodied in the form of dispositions”, “the homogeneity of dispositions that are associated with a specific position”, “dialectic that establishes itself in the course of a whole life between dispositions and positions”, “all properties that are embodied (dispositions) or objectified (economic or cultural goods)”, “social dispositions have a greater weight than ‘competencies’ warranted by education”, “the dispositions of the habitus take their particular form for each of the large domains of practice by realizing definite stylistic properties offered by each field”, “the affinity between the potentialities objectively contained by practices and dispositions”, “the adaptation to positions of dispositions linked to trajectories”, “from the point of view of their social origin and of all correlative dispositions”, “socially inculcated dispositions”, “inherited dispositions”, “the dispositions constituting the principle of the production of opinions”.

In all these cases, not one example is given of social construction, inculcation, embodiment, or the ‘transmission’ of these dispositions. No indication is provided of the way in which they can be reconstructed nor of the way in which they act, i.e. how they are activated or used as standbys according to the domains of practices or the more restricted contexts of social life. They are simply deduced from social practices pertaining to nutrition, sports, or culture which, statistically, are most frequently observed among the respondents.

The only case study we have, that of Martin Heidegger, is somewhat more detailed. However, it is disappointing because it poorly reconstructs under what conditions and in what manner Heidegger’s philosophical habitus took form. “On the one hand, the habitus of Heidegger,” Bourdieu writes, “a full professor of philosophy, of rural origin, living in the Weimar Republic, integrates into the unity of a system of dispositions generating properties that, in first instance, are associated with a position in the structure of class relations, i.e. that of the *Mittelstand*, a class that, in its way of living and in its aspirations, experiences and wishes itself as situated outside of the class system, and of the academic fraction of that class, a fraction without equal of a class that subjectively is outside the class system. In second instance, the properties generated by Heidegger’s habitus are associated with a position within the structure of the academic field, i.e. the position of a philosopher, a member of a discipline that still is dominating, although is menaced. Finally, these properties are associated with a specific position within the field of philosophy. On the other hand, Heidegger’s habitus generates properties that are associated with the social trajectory leading to this position, that of a first-generation university teacher

placed in an awkward position in the intellectual field” (Bourdieu, 1975: 150). In this way, Heidegger’s habitus is defined, from the most global context to the most specific one: the social class to which he belongs, then the particular fraction of this class, his profession of philosopher, his particular place in the realm of philosophy, and his relationship as a social miracle to the intellectual world. Would this suffice to capture the “formula generating his practices”? To what extent did Heidegger’s family, the schools he attended, his religion, his affections, his friendships, his political contacts, etc., contribute to his socialization?

From this point of view, the study by Norbert Elias of the psychological economy of the relations between Leopold Mozart and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, his son, has much more to offer, although it remained unfinished and its conceptual tools are not strong. Elias describes how the young Wolfgang Amadeus, from age three on, had to follow a regime of hard work, and to comply with an ‘intransigent discipline’ based on regular exercises composed by his father, an associate conductor of the Salzburg orchestra. Elias shows that, at an early stage, Wolfgang’s life became entirely focused on music and also how his father built strong affective ties with his son through music: Wolfgang received “an extra token of love as a bonus for each of his musical performances” (Elias, 1991: 93), Elias is convinced that the most singular characteristics of an individual can be understood only if one reconstructs the ‘intricate social network’ in which this person is embedded; he also holds that understanding an individual’s behavior requires the reconstruction of the desires he or she seeks to quench; these desires, by the way, “are not felt prior to having particular experiences” (Elias, 1991: 14). Elias offers us a—too brief—example of how a sociology at the level of the individual could clarify the formation of a person’s first dispositions.

Given that, as yet, the notions which were discussed above have yielded little, two opposing conclusions may be drawn. One conclusion is that sociology can do without these kinds of concepts and that the conceptual economy (in both senses of this word) of explanatory models will tend towards discarding them. Thus, ‘disposition’, ‘schema’, or ‘habitus’ are dispensed with because these concepts are judged to be superfluous. The other conclusion, which I wish to draw and which will lead me to the program of a sociology at the level of the individual, is that empirical research should test such rhetorical concepts in order to give them the status of useful scientific concepts. If sociology is to be the study of dispositions, instead of siding with approaches to the social world that utterly dispense with historical and social analyses—which will reduce it to being nothing more than a grammar or a logic of current actions, of systems of action, of current interactions, etc.—it must move beyond making ritual appeals to the embodied past; it should examine how this past can become socially constituted and how it can be actualized.

We might ask, for example, how dispositions or schemes are built. Do dispositions gradually tone down, or even completely disappear, because they are not actualized (Peirce said that dispositions might ‘get tired’)? Could they be destroyed by systematic attempts at counter-socialization, e.g., by missionary, sectarian, totalitarian, or educational ambitions to destroy extant habits which are seen as undesirable and, therefore, as worthy of being annihilated? Is it possible to assess degrees of forma-

tion or reinforcement of dispositions according to the frequency and the intensity with which they were acquired? Can we, on this basis, distinguish between strong and weak dispositions? The latter category may comprise passing and frail beliefs, or ephemeral or inappropriate habits. How do the multiple dispositions which have become embodied and which do not necessarily constitute a coherent and harmonious ‘system’ organize or unfold themselves?

Even if they were to be given a more precise and refined form, this first series of questions shows that we remain true to the classic problems of sociology of education. Indeed, it is difficult to arrive at a complete understanding of a disposition without reconstructing its genesis, i.e., the conditions under which and the ways in which it was formed. Capturing the matrices and the modes of socialization which have shaped a given type of social disposition should be an integral part of sociology of education, regarded as a sociology of modes of socialization—within and outside school—which is also explicitly related to a sociology of knowledge. Note that this is a major point in Weber’s general sociology: “In so far as social action is ‘supported’ by human beings (‘behind actions there always are human beings’), Weber has always held that social analysis should always comprise the question of what a human being is, taking what he calls ‘an anthropocentric point of view’, raising the question of the ‘type of human being’ that social relations in the course of time are capable of producing” (Grossein, 1996: 61).<sup>2</sup>

#### **4. Dispositions to act and dispositions to believe**

It is useful to distinguish between dispositions to act and dispositions to believe. The latter may be denoted by the term ‘beliefs’. These beliefs are more or less strongly embodied by individual agents, but they should not be systematically identified with dispositions to act. Contrary to a philosophical tradition that starts with Alexander Bain (1859) and runs to Charles Sanders Peirce (1931), it seems ill-advised to regard a belief as a disposition to act or as a ‘habit to act’. In the same way as we are bearers of a multitude of dispositions to act, all of us have to a greater or lesser extent internalized a multitude of beliefs (‘mental habits’, according to Peirce, i.e., discursive and mental habits)<sup>3</sup> that we are able to verbalize to a greater or lesser extent. A part of these beliefs is related to social norms produced, upheld, and divulged by a variety of institutions such as the family, the school, the media, the churches, and medical, juridical, and political institutions. When these beliefs have taken shape, they are confirmed to a greater or lesser extent by everyday experiences<sup>4</sup> and supported to a greater or lesser extent by various—educational, religious, political, medical, etc.—institutions. Their force varies in accordance with

<sup>2</sup> Grossein points out “that Weber does not make particular suppositions about the degree of internal unity and of homogeneity shown by how one leads his life; its assessment is only possible by undertaking empirical research.”

<sup>3</sup> See Lahire (1999a) for a discussion of discursive and mental habits.

<sup>4</sup> Peirce says that reasons for doubt are also provided by the surprising and unsettling experiences that strongly disturb “the peaceful course of a belief-habit.”

the degree to which they are constituted (acquired) and subsequently confirmed (re-acquired).

It is important, however, to refrain from assuming from the start that a belief is a disposition to act, because this would be an impediment to understanding such phenomena as *illusions*, *frustrations*, and *feelings of guilt* (or ‘bad conscience’), all of which are produced by gaps between beliefs and dispositions to act, or between beliefs and real possibilities of action.

The illusory relationship an agent may entertain with his own practices is not a fashionable topic in sociology. However, taking a simple look at the gap between what agents say about their actions and what one can know about these actions by direct observation of behavior allows us to clarify this illusion. Evidently, it is a part of the social world and of the way it functions. A large number of research results attest to this illusory and deforming relationship with practice. Moreover, we live in societies in which agents may embody beliefs, i.e., norms, models, values, ideals, etc. without having the material and/or dispositional means of respecting, realizing, reaching, or achieving them. For example, living continuously in a cultural and ideological atmosphere in which the benefits of consumption are praised may lead social agents to dream of consuming in order to ‘feel good’, ‘be happy’, or ‘be in on it’. However, these very agents may be without the economic means allowing them to act according to their beliefs; consequently, they may feel temporarily or permanently frustrated. Even more fundamentally, agents may have internalized specific norms, values, or ideals without ever being able to develop the habits to act that would allow them to attain their ideals. Nowadays, we are familiar with the gap between beliefs and dispositions experienced by students who acknowledge the legitimacy of the culture at school, even when they have major problems at school. Because their self-image is determined by what they are not, they cannot but depreciate themselves (‘I’m dumb’, ‘a moron’, ‘not intelligent’, Lahire, 1993: 283).

In the same way, given the impact print and audio-visual media have on socialization, social agents may have internalized models of behavior and of ways of living without having acquired the habits enabling them to live such coveted models in reality. In such cases, beliefs are powerless because there are no conditions under which dispositions may turn them into reality. Such gaps between a person’s beliefs and the objective conditions of his existence, or between beliefs and dispositions to act, often lead to feelings of frustration, guilt, illegitimacy, or bad conscience.

From what has been said above, it follows that we must make an effort to distinguish between the different elements that constitute the complex structure formed by the individual orderings of dispositions to act (habits to act) and beliefs (dispositions to believe, mental and discursive habits), which can be weak or strong. In adopting uncritically Peirce’s philosophical position according to which a belief is ‘something on the basis of which human beings are ready to act, in short, a habit’, sociologists would be too hasty and would not understand why particular beliefs or moral, cultural, educational, ideological, or political convictions, although sometimes strong in nature, manifest themselves for the greater part only verbally. This is explained by the fact that social agents, in so far as they have such convictions and beliefs, built them independently of the habits to act which they internalized at the same time.

Consequently, we have to admit that there are opinions, beliefs, and convictions that are expressed in conversations, discourses, and assertions only.<sup>5</sup> They are not a masquerade, however, for this would imply that there is a ‘true nature’ hidden under what is just a simple ‘vener’. They are no less ‘profound’ than the habits igniting actions; however, they were formed under different conditions and are used and actualized in different contexts and circumstances.

Taking the example of aesthetic, corporal, or dietary norms, we find that many men and women accept the standards upheld in magazines and in audio-visual media without having developed the habits pertaining to nutrition, sports, and aesthetic choices which would allow them to strive after such ideals or to come close to them in everyday life. Women often fall into the ‘trap’ of becoming homemakers; this induces them to do things they do not want to do, and which they may even criticize. They may cherish outspoken ideals and beliefs about the equal division of tasks in the household and at the same time manifest habits and tendencies to act that are contrary to such ideals. If one reduces beliefs to tendencies to act in a certain way, one cannot understand why such actions do not occur or why they appear difficult to realize. Conversely, if one sees beliefs as thin layers of ‘vener’, one cannot understand such phenomena as guilt, discomfort, shame, or ‘complexes’ resulting from the asymmetry between beliefs and dispositions to act. Such asymmetries, and sometimes contradictions, between (i) different (strong or weak) beliefs individual agents have internalized in different contexts, (ii) different (strong or weak) habits or dispositions to act, and (iii) beliefs and dispositions to act complicate sociological research; they require that researchers always ask themselves what specific effects of what type of socialization they have in fact been measuring.

## 5. The relationship to dispositions

The scientific program of a sociology at the level of the individual should fill the gap left by all theories of socialization and inculcation, such as the theory of the habitus, which rhetorically refers to “the internalization of what is external” and “the embodiment of objective structures” without making them concrete by ethnographic or historical descriptions and theoretical analysis (Bernstein, 1992). For a long time, sociologists have continued to focus on the question of social reproduction as effected by the family, the school, and various social and cultural institutions. They have only recorded that there is inequality vis-à-vis legitimate institutions—school and other cultural institutions—and/or inequality in the social and cultural heritage of different generations in a family. In short, by emphasizing ‘this reproduces itself’, sociologists have neglected ‘what is reproduced’ and ‘how, in what manner, this reproduces itself’. This has resulted in a ‘full’ theory of reproduction, but an ‘empty’ theory of knowledge and of modes of socialization. What exactly is ‘school’? What kinds of relations of interdependence are welded specifically at

<sup>5</sup> When certain dispositions are used as standbys because there is no context in which they may be actualized, they may also manifest themselves as the kind of dream one has while awake.

school? What does school ‘transmit’? How does this ‘transmission’<sup>6</sup> take place? The same questions may be posed about the family or about any cultural institution.

Parts of the studies in the sociology of education and culture have prompted researchers increasingly to differentiate between modalities of internalization and the embodiment of habits, ways of acting, seeing and feeling. The way interviewees talk about their practices, however, indicates that they do not all have the same relationship to the multiple habits they have embodied. Empirical research allows us to obtain a clear idea of the different ways in which people live their embodied habits and the realization of these habits. For instance, in order to differentiate between situations, it is particularly useful to distinguish between ‘disposition’ and ‘appetency’. The phrase ‘It’s stronger than I am’ characterizes dispositions—as propensities or inclinations—but it can take different individual forms, i.e., the form of a *passion* (disposition + strong appetency), of a simple *routine* (disposition + absence of appetency or indifference), or even of a *bad habit* or a *dirty mania* (disposition + distaste, disapproval, opposition to such a disposition).

Obviously, ‘making a virtue out of necessity’<sup>7</sup> is not a general principle regulating how people experience the social world around them, i.e. loving what is necessary, taking pleasure in practices or consumption, bowing to what is inevitable. This enchanted relationship to the world prevents us from recognizing that things could be different, that other choices could be made. The assumption that basic cultural constraints are extremely well internalized makes choices seem self-propelling, natural, and self-evident. The model according to which a virtue is made out of necessity treats an external objective constraint as an internal drive, as a personal taste or passion, as a vital need. For example, some children from the lower classes seem to have prematurely internalized ‘school success’ as a personal internal necessity (Lahire, 1995: 239–269). This requires a particular psychological complexion—related to a socio-affective economy that a sociological analysis of interdependence relationships is capable of mapping out—that is not frequently observed. Viewed from this angle, it seems that the more socialization (the embodiment of habits) is premature, regular, and intense, the greater the chance that the logic of this ‘second nature’, which is aptly expressed by the phrase ‘it’s stronger than I am’, will manifest itself.

The same model also presupposes that dispositions are strong (and not weak or moderately strong); moreover, it does not allow us to conceive that people can distance themselves from their role. However, dispositions differ from one another in stability and strength. There are stronger and weaker dispositions; in turn, the relative strength or weakness of dispositions depends in part on the frequency with which they are actualized. A permanent habit is not internalized within a few hours. On the other hand, certain dispositions may weaken or peter out for lack of conditions under which they may be actualized, or because of conditions curtailing them.

<sup>6</sup> The very notion of ‘transmission’ should be revised, if we want to progress towards a sociology of the concrete modalities of socialization (Lahire, 1995, 1998: 206–210).

<sup>7</sup> Bourdieu (1979: 433) characterizes the habitus as ‘virtue made out of necessity’.

When sociologists are reluctant to distinguish between strong and weak dispositions, this is because they prefer to give clear-cut pictures of the cultures and the symbolic universes they describe rather than ‘mitigated’, ‘average’ or ‘half-tone’ situations. For them, this is intellectually much less satisfying, although it may be much closer to reality. They engage in overinterpretation of the intensity of behaviors, beliefs, approbations, or convictions. “Overinterpretation leads to constructing false rates of intensity,” writes Paul Veyne. This commits one to the illusion that “intensity is the cruising speed of everyday life”, or it induces one “to attribute under the name of collective conscience to all social agents and to any stretch of time moments of intensity or of virtuosity that only fit a few superior minds.” (Veyne, 2000: 65) For this reason, this historian states, “in sociological descriptions, the identification of ‘degrees of habituation’ precedes the typology of habitus”; he also holds that “such titles of chapters in books on world history as ‘An Era of Faith’, ‘Muslim Identity’, ‘Paganism and the Ancient City’ are nothing but overinterpretations misrecognizing a rainbow of very unequal reactions.” (Veyne, 2000: 73). Within the model according to which a virtue is made out of necessity, the involvement in practice is such that there is no room left for doubt. The social agent does not resist, has no other appetites, does not feel other drives, never tires of investing in practice. Such a model, in fact, denotes a particular mode of existence of the social that has been embodied and actualized. But the enchanted way of living one’s habits is not the only way possible.

Socialized individuals, on the one hand, may have internalized in a durable way a certain number of cultural, intellectual, etc., habits and, on the other hand, may not feel any need to activate them, except perhaps on a routine basis, as an automatism, a habit or, worse, an obligation (‘I do it, but under pressure’, ‘I restrain myself’) without passion or delight. Contrary to the accepted view in sociology according to which we delight in doing what we are good at, investigations of cultural practices enable us to identify two distinct dimensions, i.e. that of competence and that of propensity. For example, it has been found that there are avid readers or aficionados of reading among students whose mastery of the French language is poor and, conversely, that the most able students at secondary schools sometimes are unenthusiastic readers, who are barely interested in what books have to offer. If cultural competence often favors intense and passionate reading, it does not suffice in itself to create avid or devoted readers (Singly 1993).

Moreover, some habits may be established durably in the bodies of individual agents who, when their situations are changed by such life events as marriage, birth, divorce, the death of a loved one, or a new position, may wish to shake off what they then come to consider as ‘bad habits’. It seems that the new situation induces them to feel that parts of their dispositions or habits have become strange to them.

Thus, habits may be internalized and actualized only under pressure or obligation; on the other hand, they may manifest themselves as passions, desires, or inclinations; or as unconscious routines without real passion, or without the idea that one is under constraint to act in a specific way. Each of these modalities depends on the way in which particular habits or dispositions were acquired, on the time at which this took place, and, finally, on the specific ‘context’ that offered an opportunity to

actualize them. Habits, then, may produce what we call passion in everyday language if they have been internalized at an early stage in life and under conditions that favor their proper internalization, i.e., without meeting opposite demands; without obfuscation of the ‘cultural transmission’ by cultural dissonances between parents, between what adults do and what they say, or between what they say and the way in which they say it; and if they meet positive conditions, which are socially gratifying, for putting them into action.

It would be a too strict form of Durkheimianism to hold that talking about habits in terms of affects, routines, or constraints is misleading in that this obscures the fact that behavior manifested by individual social agents is nothing but the externalization of the result of the internalization of social constraints. In taking this stance, we would disregard important nuances in the degree to which habits are internalized and established, in the conditions under which this occurs, in the modalities of their acquisition, and in the conditions under which they come to ‘function’. In considering mention of choice, desire, passion, and spontaneity as purely commonsensical or ideological in nature, we would be led to ignore fine-grained dimensions of conditions, modalities, and effects of socialization.

Why then, save some exceptions, should the internalization of behavioral models engaging differences between the sexes be experienced in a fashion other than the internalization of obligations or constraints? Indeed, from a cultural or historical point of view, nothing is more constraining and arbitrary than such models. The social world acts as a kind of total institution effecting a continuous socialization concerning these very differences (Lahire, 2001c). The social world is permanently oversaturated by them. However, because these differences are ubiquitous and present themselves right from the start in life, the constraints they encompass are seldom felt as such or, when they are, they are experienced less strongly than other types of social constraints. If children and adolescents feel the models of behavior and of thought imposed by the educational system to be strongly constraining in nature, this is because school, independently of its degree of integration into the family, often remains a ‘strange’ and constraining universe, in particular when it maximizes its demands for asceticism, as is bound to happen when students have to prepare for their exams. If, from primary school on, young children were exposed to the rigid and intense asceticism of the educational system, there might be a chance that the asceticism required by secondary school and parts of higher education would be experienced as normal. This, evidently, is extremely rare nowadays.

## **6. Transfer and standby mode**

Bourdieu’s theory of the habitus takes it to be self-evident that socially constituted schemes and dispositions may be transferred or transposed, and that they lend themselves to general use. But has the notion of transferability contributed much to sociological thought? Stated otherwise, has it been indispensable to opening up new avenues of sociological research? This remains an open question. To establish whether a transfer has occurred, a close scrutiny of a particular mode of socialization as

well as an exact assessment of its impact should be undertaken. For example, the socialization achieved by the educational system produces effects that educational sociologists regard as durable and transferable. But what does school transfer to situations outside school? A sense of the legitimacy of cultural products, e.g., the idea there are forms of literature which differ from each other as to their cultural status? A general conception of knowledge, i.e., a particular relationship to scientific knowledge? Or hands-on techniques useful for studying any topic or intellectual habits? The feeling that one is important (a great conceit) that school, as a legitimate institution, passes on to those who bow to it? It would be a mistake to hold that such processes of transfer have been objects of extended empirical investigation.

In so far as sociologists have based their investigations on these notions, e.g., on that of the ‘generalizability’ of dispositions and schemes, this has reinforced a certain laziness with regard to empirical matters. When it is assumed that conducting research on any particular practice cannot but enable one to assess general dispositions which can be transferred to other situations, then one is saved the expense of entering a long and tedious avenue of research. It is precisely this avenue that a sociology at the level of the individual is determined to follow.

The notion of disposition implies undertaking the cognitive operation of assessing the coherence of diverse behaviors, opinions, practices, etc., which are sometimes scattered. However, this should not make us think that any disposition is necessarily general, context-independent, and active at each moment in the life of a social agent. The assessment of this coherence should go together with a concern for the delimitation of classes of contexts, domains of relevance, and actualization of the specific disposition that is reconstructed.

Nowadays, the notion of transferability, taken from the work of Jean Piaget, meets growing skepticism on the part of contemporary psychologists (Loarer et al., 1995; DiMaggio, 1997).<sup>8</sup> They highlight the fact that there is only a relative *solidarity* between schemes and situations (types of tasks, activities, or information) in which these schemes are shaped and acquired. When adults are taught to recall particular kinds of objects, they do better when they are asked to recall the same kind of objects, but they will not necessarily improve their mnemonic performance when they are asked to recall other types of objects. Therefore, the transferability of a schema or a disposition is only relative in nature, and the transfer succeeds better the more the context in which it is undertaken is similar in content or in structure to the context in which the schema or disposition in question was acquired. Dispositions become active *under specific conditions* only (Lahire, 1998: 63–69, 2002: 16–18).

However, the major problems this notion creates are false or premature generalizations. Indeed, the idea that *all* schemes and dispositions can be transferred *on every occasion* poses an important problem.<sup>9</sup> Adhering to this idea creates a short-

<sup>8</sup> Michel Huteau (1985: 64) writes, “To say that there is interaction between subjects and situations amounts to saying that if there are internal dispositions they pertain to classes of situations.”

<sup>9</sup> Although Max Weber uses the concept of habitus, this does not mean that he saw it as a system of general dispositions. Therefore, he could say, “This state might correspond to a habitus outside of daily life, of a passing nature only” (Weber, 1996: 347).

circuit in the normal course of an investigation, i.e., researchers save themselves the difficult task of comparing practices in different domains of practices, or practices that are of the same kind, but that occur in different situations. However, only such comparisons will enable us to determine (i) whether or not a transfer has taken place; (ii) what kind of transfer is being dealt with. When general schemes, dispositions, and habitus are hastily inferred from an analysis of the practices of an individual or a social group, which always occur in a specific social context, which has its particular level of generality, and when it is held that these schemes, dispositions, and habitus all function in the same way, independently of specific situations, places, and circumstances, serious misinterpretations are inevitable.

Are differences in behavior that can be observed in different contexts only products of the refraction of the same habitus, or of the same system of dispositions? In general, the idea that transfers have a high degree of generality is tacitly agreed upon and has hardly been tested empirically. This is an obstacle to envisaging (and observing) that there are schemes and dispositions whose application is strictly limited to particular social situations or fields of practices. Similarly, there are partial ways of categorizing, perceiving, and appraising, and of sensory-motor action, that are linked to specific objects or domains. Disregarding them leads to attributing a unique and simple function to the complex process of ‘externalizing what has been internalized’. This function comprises assimilation and accommodation, i.e., the assimilation of situations to embodied schemes, and the accommodation (correction) of previously acquired schemes to varying and changing situations.

What happens when dispositions do not lend themselves to general use, but are simply inhibited sometimes, or deactivated in order to give room to the formation or activation of other dispositions? What if they could be restricted to specific social dispositions, pertaining to a well-defined domain so an individual could learn to develop different dispositions in different social contexts? What if we have to deal not with a simple mechanism which *transfers a system of dispositions*, but with a more complex mechanism that switches on and off, or inhibits and activates dispositions which, clearly, suppose that every singular individual is a bearer of a plurality of dispositions and passes through a plurality of social contexts?

How do individuals experience the plurality of the social world as well as their own internal plurality? What is the impact of this (external and internal) plurality on the psychological and mental economy of the individuals who experience it? What dispositions do individuals invest in different universes—in the broad sense of this word—they happen to pass through? How do they distribute their energy and their time across these universes? For a *sociology at the level of the individual*, these have a particular urgency.

## 7. The plural singular

In descending to a lower level of observation, the assessment of the singular *as such*, i.e., of the individual as a complex product of various socialization processes, we are forced to face the internal plurality of individuals: *the singular is necessarily*

*plural in nature*. The coherence and homogeneity which sociologists attribute to individual dispositions at the level of the group, or of institutions, will then be replaced by a more complex vision of the individual as being less unified and as the bearer of heterogeneous habits, schemes, or dispositions which may be contrary or even contradictory to one another.<sup>10</sup>

For a long time, the social sciences—in particular, sociology, historiography, and anthropology—have nurtured a homogenizing perspective on individuals in society. Investigating *their* view of the world, *their* relationship to the world, or ‘*the* generative formula of their practices’, i.e., the habitus, has always been and still is considered to be self-evident. However, it is important to struggle against a philosophical or, more exactly, a phenomenological tradition for which mention in the singular of ‘a subject’s being-in-the-world’, and our ‘relationship’ or ‘bond with the world and with others’ is common fare. This produces poor discursive and mental habits in sociologists who are more or less consciously heirs to this mode of thought.

This is exemplified by the attempt of Emmanuel Bourdieu to defend philosophically the idea that there do exist coherent and homogeneous systems of dispositions. He tried to build his case on the famous study by Erwin Panofsky (1992) devoted to Galileo. Emmanuel Bourdieu (1998: 7) emphasizes that “the multiple intellectual investments” of the great natural scientist “comprise more than just a juxtaposition of separate activities; on the contrary, they constitute a system of homologous practices”. Panofsky is held to denote the generative formula of Galileo’s scholarly practices by the term ‘critical purism’. Emmanuel Bourdieu’s (1998: 8) conclusion is that “by the idea of critical purism Panofsky captures the fundamental trait which organizes the entire behavior of the great scientist and allots coherence and a individual ‘style’ to it”. But Panofsky does not say that ‘Galileo’s’ own ‘style’ is summarized by the dispositional formula of ‘critical purism’. He does not talk about ‘the entire behavior’ of Galileo, but only about the behavior of Galileo as a natural scientist. The difference is huge. Knowing that Galileo was more than a natural scientist, it is hard to conceive how ‘critical purism’ may be the origin of how the same man behaved at home, in friendships, in love, in feeding and in clothing himself. Similarly, when the literary habitus of a novelist like Gustave Flaubert (Bourdieu, 1992) or the philosophical habitus of an author like Martin Heidegger (Bourdieu, 1975) is evoked, one may ask to what extent these figures relied on the same ‘system of dispositions’ in a series of social situations outside literature or philosophy. Could their social behavior in its entirety—regardless of the domain in which it unfolded—be reduced to this ‘system’? This should not be taken for granted, as is attested by observations of behavior in the real world.

<sup>10</sup> Case studies of ‘class defectors’ are extremely important in order to (i) understand how an individual may embody contradictory dispositions; how he lives with this contradiction (by smothering or putting on standby his earlier dispositions? by making a clear division between the universes in which he intends to put his contradictory dispositions into action? by suffering constantly from the frustrating contradiction between his dispositions?), and (ii) assess to what extent the relative plurality of the dispositions of which individuals are bearers does (or does not) result in psychological conflicts or in a disintegration of their identities.

Some postmodern sociologists take a completely different direction; they relish the idea that social agents are infinitely fragmented, or dispersed. It would be an error to want to settle a priori once and for all the question of the extent to which individual agents manifest uniqueness or plurality. The question is, what are the socio-historical conditions that make possible the production of agents who manifest plurality or a deep-reaching uniqueness? Usually, no reasons are given for choosing between these two alternatives; in certain cases, the choice is based on moral presuppositions rather than on empirical findings. The (relative) coherence of habits, schemes, or dispositions that individuals may have internalized depends on the coherence of the principles of socialization to which they were exposed. The more individuals have found themselves simultaneously or successively in a variety of non-homogenous, sometimes even contradictory, situations, and the more such situations were experienced at an early stage in life, the more such individuals will show heritage of non-homogeneous and non-unified dispositions, habits, and abilities varying across the social contexts in which their personal development took place.

The problem of the nature and the organization of the personal heritage of dispositions should be solved by conducting empirical research. One should not try to settle the problem before posing it by an a priori use of such coercive terms as ‘*system* of dispositions’. The idea that there is a ‘heritage’ or a ‘stockpile’ of dispositions allows us to revise the interpretative aims of some sociological studies of dispositions. That individuals are neither ‘fragmented’ realities—as postmodernist views of ‘exploded’, ‘dispersed’ individuals lacking ‘unity’ and ‘coherence’ have it—nor pure and sensible adaptations to varying demands posed by particular contexts—as the empiricist view of experience claims—does not increase the coherence of experiences which are constitutive of socialization and the cohesion of the dispositional traces they leave on individuals. How do particular dispositions combine to account for behaviors manifested in specific contexts? Are they relatively independent of one another, and do they combine in different ways according to the contexts of action? How can they conflict with each other and impede actions or decisions? As was stated already these questions should be solved in the arena of empirical research, rather than be settled in purely theoretical and rhetorical terms.

## **8. The multiple contexts of action**

Except for some forms of sociolinguistic research, which have a keen eye for contextual variations, as is exemplified by the work of David Efron, William Labov, and John Gumperz, sociologists have rarely pursued the objective of comparing the practices of single individuals in different domains of activity, social universes, or types of interaction. Instead, they conduct their investigations at a more global level, that of the practices of a group. Studies of how individuals act in particular arenas, within a single domain of practice, usually belong to a particular subdiscipline, e.g., the sociology of the family, education, religion, culture, art, occupations, health, youth, religion, politics, law. From a scientific point of view, this fragmentation is questionable. Moreover, these studies often show a questionable tendency to infer

general dispositions, habitus, world views, or general relationships to the world from behaviors observed in each of these fields.

Part of the program for sociology that I propose here requires the development of new methods. In order to identify the internal plurality of individuals and the way it acts and ‘distributes’ itself according to various social contexts, we must equip ourselves with methods enabling us to observe directly or to reconstruct indirectly—using various sources—the contextual variations, in the broad sense of the word, shown by individual behaviors. Only such methods will allow us to gauge to what extent certain dispositions can be transferred (or not) from one situation to another, to assess how the mechanism operates that inhibits, switches off, activates and turns on dispositions, and to appraise the degree of heterogeneity or homogeneity exhibited by the heritage of habits which individuals have internalized in their past socialization. Although direct observation remains the most effective method, it is rarely feasible because ‘following’ an individual through different stages of life requires much work and poses the problem of how changing normative frameworks should be dealt with. However, interviews and archival research can bring to light—if one is as interested in what is constant as in what is variable—many subtle contradictions, heterogeneous behavioral patterns which remain beyond the reach of surveys often help to maintain the illusion that the behaviors they investigate display coherence and unity.

Our task is not only to compare the practices the same individuals deploy in various social universes—social worlds that sometimes, although not systematically, take the form of battlefields—e.g., those of occupation, family, education, neighborhood, church, political parties, leisure, and cultural institutions. We also should differentiate between situations occurring within each of these large fields—which are often not neatly separated from one another in social reality—taking into account differences between families, occupations, etc.

## **9. The social production of individuals**

Numerous social institutions encourage us to believe that every person is unique. It is a complete scientific program in itself to study the practical and discursive social conditions that produce the moral and ideological views of individuals as isolated, coherent, autonomous, and singular beings, who are essentially self-contained prior to any contact with others, and who have an inner life or an authentic self. In so far as sociology takes an interest in empirical subjects—as envisioned by Louis Dumont (1983)—and in the social logics identified at the level of these individuals—who differ completely from the individuals devoid of social ties that we owe to methodological individualism—it must also take an interest in the production of moral, ideological, or pseudo-scientific images of the individual self from which it has kept a critical distance in order to establish itself as a scientific discipline.

It would be useful to do research in the field of historical sociology, into how discursive, in particular narrative, practices unify the ‘self’. The illusion that there is a unified, homogeneous, and coherent self has some roots in society. One could even

say that, in our societies, the unity of the self is permanently celebrated. First, there is the ‘proper name’, associated with a ‘first name’, which is symbolized by the written signature. This consecrates the singular nature of a ‘person’ and it sticks to some of us throughout our lives, to men to a greater extent than to women. Second, this consecration occurs through all kinds of discursive forms of presentation of the self, its history, and its life, such as CV’s, funeral orations, obituaries, eulogies, biographies and autobiographies, stories about oneself or others, *Bildungsromane*, or the life story of an accused before a court of justice. A considerable number of these discursive genres strongly assumes that the self forms a unity. The ‘I’ that expresses itself, or the ‘he’ or the ‘she’ that is narrated, warrants some kind of durability and permanence of a personal coherent and uniform identity.

From this point of view, a new dialogue can be started with historiographers about the writing of historical biographies. How can the genre of the biography be changed, given that, as a particular kind of discourse, it preeminently favors the coherence of a trajectory, of a life, or an effort, leaving aside all uncertainties, incoherences, and contradictions which in real life beset historical figures? There can be no question of giving in to the positivist illusion that it is possible to grasp the totality of a ‘personality’ in all facets of its existence. However, the genre of the historical biography would certainly be renewed by avoiding the erasure and the systematic elimination of the heterogeneous and contradictory data that are obtained by combining the varied pieces of information about an individual resting in archives. A person may be approached by taking into account the different aspects of his social activities, instead of simply drawing a coherent portrait of him as an artist, a king, a warrior, a statesman, or a clergyman under the pretext that science always simplifies and that scientific research is inevitably more coherent than reality, or that science necessarily imposes order on the relative disorder of empirical reality. In this way, historical biography may become a domain where experiments are conducted, i.e. where experiences are made and trials are set up with the aim of achieving methodological refinement. In this way, the wish uttered by Giovanni Lévi would come true; he urged historiographers to reconsider “established biographical tradition” and the “very rhetoric” of historiography, both of which rest on “models combining an ordered chronology, a coherent and stable self, actions without intermittencies, and decisions without uncertainties” (Lévi, 1989: 1326)

The production of the individual as a singular and autonomous person is often the objective of ideological and philosophical discourses (Dumont, 1983; Taylor, 1998). However, we should not allow this to make us neglect the study of institutions, social mechanisms, or interdependence relations that contribute to the giving of the feeling of singularity, autonomy, internality, and stable self-identity (Elias, 1991: 64–67).<sup>11</sup> Following up on the invitation of Mary Douglas, we may assess how conceptions of individual identity or of the ‘ego’ strongly depend on religious and juridical institutions. If the idea of a ‘unitary ego’ has such a strong significance in our

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<sup>11</sup> For its part, school contributes to the formation of ‘autonomous’ students (Lahire, 2001b).

society, this is because it has become linked to the idea of ‘individual responsibility’, i.e., responsibility towards God (the Supreme Judge), or mankind (Court of Justice). Mary Douglas reminds us that “John Locke wanted to justify the existence of such a unitary and responsible ‘ego’, because he thought that this was necessary from a theological point of view. When we appear before the Supreme Judge, he says, how could we stand up for our actions if we had multiple and fragmented personalities?” (Douglas, 1999: 155).

Thinking along the same lines, we may clarify the relationship between ‘judgement’, ‘responsibility’ and ‘individual identity’ by taking into account the etymology of the expression of ‘in one’s hearts of hearts’ (*for intérieur*), which means ‘internal tribunal’ or ‘tribunal of the conscience’. Indeed, what would remain of our individual responsibility if the social world officially accepted the idea that there is a plurality of ‘egos’? Institutions take this view mostly in so far as it relates to the field of pathology—the doubling of a person’s personality, referring to individuals who lost control of themselves and who were not the same persons when they committed specific acts. However, there are so many occasions in ordinary life to excuse oneself, as Mary Douglas rightly points out, by saying that one was not oneself anymore: ‘It wasn’t me anymore’, ‘I was not myself anymore’, ‘I did not recognize myself’, ‘I didn’t do it voluntarily, consciously’, etc. Case studies often reveal this internal plurality (Lahire, 2002). Social agents are not made all of one piece; *they are fit together from separate parts, complex charts of dispositions to act and to believe which are more or less tightly constituted*. This does not mean that they ‘lack coherence’, but that they lack a principle of unique coherence—of *beliefs, i.e., models, norms, ideals, values, and of dispositions to act*.

This means that the idea of a unique and unified ‘self’, ‘ego’, or personality is an illusion that is socially warranted, to use Durkheim’s expression. It is hard to see by what miracle real individual inclinations, dispositions, or habits are made to correspond to this model according to which a person arrives at a unified self. By assuming or presupposing that there is an individual uniqueness, a cognitive or behavioral style, a generative principle, a generative formula, a driving force of personality, the social sciences are typical victims of the multiple institutions that determine how we conceive of individuals.

These commonsensical categories are not problematic as long as we essentially aim at accounting for variations between groups or categories. In contrast, they impede the acquisition of sociological knowledge when, changing our focal distance, we take a marked interest in variations between individuals and (even more) in variations within individuals functioning in various contexts—domains of practices, spheres of activities, types of interactions, etc. In trying to understand internalized (individualized) social reality, we may investigate large numbers of cases or a number of individual cases, cases that are frequent statistically or cases that, from a statistical point of view, are atypical or marginal. However, we must then redefine our analytical instruments, in particular our conception of these ‘small productive machines’ spawning practices, these dispositional—behavioral, cognitive, affective, valuative—matrices retaining in the body of every individual the outcomes of different series of past experiences.

## 10. The generality of the singular

There is no need to be concerned that a sociology at the level of the individual has no use for statistics. On the contrary, it uses findings and analyses from sociological research employing statistical techniques, but it takes a closer look in order to assess heterogeneity within individuals. Large data sets and customary quantitative investigations provide good opportunities to identify the plurality of individual dispositions (Lahire, 2001a). A sociology at the level of the individual does not specialize in exceptional cases, which statistically are atypical and improbable, although such cases are sometimes useful to get a clear view of specific problems, e.g., the defectors of a particular social class.

This is shown by Carlo Ginzburg's historical study of the atypical case of a miller named Menocchio (Ginzburg, 1980). The identification of what is singular necessarily proceeds by understanding what is general. One even may say that nothing is more general than what is singular. Gradually, we come to understand by what subtle play of general characteristics and experiences in different realms of society Menocchio becomes what he is. To understand what is social in its particularized or individualized form, we must understand what is social to its full extent. In other words, to account for the singular nature of a particular case, we must understand the general processes of which this case is a complex product.

Ginzburg, in clarifying his 'indicative paradigm', refers to Conan Doyle and to his character Sherlock Holmes. The way in which the latter conducts his investigations may be used to show how unimportant details are transformed into revealing details, i.e., into indications of particular traits of character, properties, practices, or dispositions. This supposes general—historical, geographical, anthropological, economic—knowledge of the social world and of its historical tendencies, whether these are inferred from statistical data or constructed on the basis of documents, direct observations, or eyewitness reports.

The deductions made by Sherlock Holmes require an incredible amount of knowledge; his reasoning is based on his knowledge of particular professional, cultural, or national habits. This knowledge does not pertain to particulars; it uses general knowledge with the aim of understanding singular cases.

When the suggestion is made that case studies should be undertaken, the poor statistical representativeness of the cases that have been investigated comes to mind. We may see the study of singular cases as opposed to the acquisition of knowledge of general tendencies and of recurrent patterns in the social world, which are statistically assessed. However, 'singular' does not mean 'non-reproducible' or 'unique'. Taking the singular for the inverse of the general brings old oppositions back to life, i.e., that between nomothetic and ideographic sciences, and that between generalizing and individualizing methods. These oppositions have lost much of their relevance.

Paradoxically, case studies, in their singularity and not as illustrations of ideal types, of tendencies, or of general properties that, on the basis of statistical research, are most frequently associated with a group, can reveal situations that, statistically, are more frequent than we might think. Indeed, social scientists often work with

dichotomies that enable them to see how different groups or categories of individuals are distributed between opposite poles. For instance, sociology of education may oppose students according to whether they tend towards the pole of asceticism or the pole of hedonism. One might have in mind then two ideal types of students: on the one hand, ascetic students who are completely focused on academic work to the detriment of everything else—relationships with friends, lovers, family members, leisure time, and vacation; on the other hand, Bohemian students, who devote themselves to parties, leisure activities, friends, and lovers, and who only occasionally spend time on their studies (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1964; Lahire, 1997). However, if we try to find students closely corresponding to each of these poles in the real world, statistics tell us that we are unlikely to find many candidates. The vast majority of students may be found between the two poles, in ‘average’ situations of a mixed and ambivalent nature. These students are neither workaholics nor inveterate party-goers, but switch between the two according to the situations that present themselves to them at various points of time and that exert varying degrees of pressure. Such situations pertain to periods of work and of relaxation. Those students suffer alternately from the weight of their coercive asceticism and the bad conscience proper to hedonist students (Lahire, 1998: 76–79). As bearers of more or less strongly established dispositions, which are relatively contradictory in nature, statistically, they are greater in number than their counterparts who, in light of the opposition created by the theory, are ‘exemplary’. Even students who most strongly epitomize one of the two poles may feel conflicting desires, at least symbolically.

Similarly, when sociologists try to understand processes of educational ‘failure’ or ‘success’ on the basis of a conceptual opposition between two types of sociolinguistic codes (Bernstein, 1975) or on the basis of values that are culturally arbitrary in nature (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970), they generally focus their analyses on each of the two opposed poles. This causes them to neglect the mixed and ambivalent situations of ‘average’ students who have developed educational dispositions which, however, are weaker, or in any case not sufficiently strong to prevail systematically over dispositions that do not pertain to education. From a theoretical point of view, it is no accident that sociologists of education have mainly tried to explain why ‘successes’ or ‘failures’ occur, and that they have completely passed over these ‘average’ students. However, even children who have much trouble at school, do not leave school unaffected, and they also develop ambivalent attitudes towards school (Lahire, 1993).

Therefore, it would not be fair to the program of a sociology at the level of the individual to maintain that it investigates only exceptions to statistical rules, which are interesting in themselves, but are only of secondary or of marginal interest. Such an objection lacks any ground. Paradoxically, many researchers comment on their statistical tables and interpret their data in terms of the distance at which groups or kinds of individuals are situated from the two poles of the particular opposition the investigation set out to clarify. At the same, however, they miss the cases that lie between the poles; these are the greatest in number and the most ordinary. The too ‘perfect’ example that sometimes summarizes or cumulates the entire range of statistical properties which a given group shares to the greatest extent is certainly

necessary when in order to illustrate an analysis based on statistical data. Such examples are often used to portray an era, a group, a class, or a type of social agent. However, they may become misleading and distorting when they are considered to be more than illustrations of an institution, an era, or a type of individual; above all, when they are taken *for particular instances of reality*, i.e., complex and singular outcomes of a plurality of experiences effecting socialization. For the social reality embodied by each singular individual is much less simple than that. The cross-tabulations undertaken in large surveys give us the characteristics—resources, attitudes, practices, etc.—that statistically are most strongly associated with a particular group or kind of social agent. However, it is impossible to infer that each individual member in such a group or kind exemplifies all or even the greater part of these characteristics.

At the same time, precisely because it tries to capture relatively singular combinations of general characteristics, the sociology at the level of the individual has some problems with a certain use of the method of ideal types. When sociologists present coherent overviews without paying attention to cases that are less homogeneous or clear and, as such, are more ambivalent in nature, they are giving an image of the social world, in particular of individual cases, that hardly exists and whose coherence is questionable. The method of ideal types then clearly moves in the direction of a ‘full’ and homogenized view of the social world. This problem cannot be imputed to Weber, who realized that “heterogeneous elements by themselves may be compatible with one another” (Weber, 1996: 206), and that “human beings are not to be seen as books bound in a very refined way in chamois leather”, and that they also are not “logical constructions or exempt of psychological contradictions” (Weber, 1996: 364); the problem should be imputed to Weber’s followers who, as Marx said, confound the things of logic with the logic of things.

## 11. Reasons for a sociology at the level of the individual

In analyzing the most singular aspects of social life, a *sociology at the level of the individual* joins the long sociological tradition ranging from Emile Durkheim to Maurice Halbwachs to Norbert Elias. This tradition aims at linking the economy of the psychological to the frameworks of social life. In order to conduct these studies, one needs to be equipped with adequate conceptual and methodological tools.

For several years, I have been trying to demonstrate that variations between and within individuals should interest sociologists (Lahire, 1995, 1998, 1999b, 2001a, 2002). This work has been and is undertaken within the framework of a theory of action based on a sociology of a plurality of dispositions—socialization undergone in the past is more or less heterogeneous in nature and produces heterogeneous, sometimes even contradictory, dispositions to act and to believe. This dispositional plurality is also context-bound; the contexts in which dispositions are actualized show a substantial amount of variation. In this way, a sociology unfolds itself which does not try to ignore the fact that the social world is based on individuals;

consequently, it investigates how individuals pass through different scenes, contexts, fields of force, etc.

It is legitimate to ask why sociologists should study what is social at the level of the individual. Taking this epistemological perspective, does one not make common cause or go along with the strong tendencies towards individualization that nowadays shape social life? By virtue of the dynamism of sociology as a discipline, interest in what is individual marks its progress towards scientific autonomy. However, independently of this dynamism, it is evident that a sociology at the level of the individual honors a historical necessity to reflect on what is social in a society that is characterized by strong individualization. In a time when human beings can be more and more conceived of as isolated, autonomous, gifted with reason, ‘without bonds or roots’, opposed to ‘society’ against which they defend their radical ‘authenticity’, sociology should meet the obligation and the challenge to bring to light the social production of the individual—and of the conceptions that are developed of it—and to show that what is social cannot be reduced to what is collective or general, but that it is contained in the most singular aspects of every individual.

To the same extent, the social world is inside us as well as outside us. It is the origin of all that makes us miserable or happy at a personal or a collective level, because it has become differentiated and complex to such an degree as to make us feel that what is intimate, singular, or personal distinguishes itself in a natural and clear way from society, and is even opposed to it. It is a paradox or deception of the social world that, at an advanced stage of its differentiation, it produces on a large scale the sensation that our lives are subjective, and shaped independently of society or even outside it. The illusion of being alone is common. One of the great myths of our time is that our ultimate freedom is located in the individual, in our heart of hearts, or in our subjectivity. We may wish to condone myths or to get rid of them. It seems, then, that we make substantial intellectual progress when we give up the illusion that our ‘subjectivity’, ‘inner side’, or ‘singularity’ is not determined, that we have free will or a ‘personal’ existence on which the social world has no influence. When we take this step, the internal (dispositional) and external (contextual) forces and counter-forces appear to which we are continuously exposed from the day we are born, and which make us feel what we feel, think what we think, and do what we do.

Seen from this angle, sociology should strive at developing a view of man in society which is scientifically more correct than the caricatures we inevitably come up with when we conceive of individuals on the basis of ideal types drawn from studies of groups, periods of history, or institutions. In particular, sociology should be able to answer questions arising in the most common, but essential, walks of everyday life about how individuals exist in society. For instance, how should we understand the way an individual can astonish his surroundings, i.e., people who have a considerable intuitive and practical knowledge of this individual, and even astonish himself by performing certain acts in certain circumstances and at a certain times of his life? What conception of social determinism can account for the relative indetermination of the individual component that is the charm of social life?

It is impossible to predict the occurrence of a particular social behavior like the fall of bodies can be predicted from the universal law of gravitation. This is because two things combine: on the one hand, the impossibility of reducing a social context to a limited series of relevant parameters, as is done in experiments conducted in physics or chemistry; on the other hand, the internal plurality of individuals whose heritage of habits, schemes, and dispositions is more or less heterogeneous, since it is composed of elements that are more or less contradictory. It is, therefore, difficult to predict with certainty what, in a given context, will ‘play’ or gain ‘force’ for each individual and which of the multiple habits he has embodied will be triggered in or by a particular context. Depending on the people with whom an individual lives on a permanent or a temporary basis (a partner, children, friends, colleagues), depending on the position he has in his relations with these people, or by virtue of what they do together (in which situations a individual may be dominated or dominating, a leader or a follower, in charge or a participant, interested or not, competent or not), his heritage of dispositions or competencies will be exposed to different influences of varying strength.

What, in a given context, determines the activation of a particular disposition can be conceived of as the product of the *interaction of (relations between) internal and external forces*: between internal forces, i.e., between dispositions that are more or less strongly established during past socialization and associated with a greater or lesser amount of appetency, and between external forces, i.e., between elements of the context, such as the objective characteristics of a situation that may be associated with different persons, which weigh more or less strongly on individual agents, forcing or challenging them with varying strength. Situations occurring in a persons profession, at school, with family, or with friends exert unequal pressure.

From our current knowledge of the social world, we must derive the sociological observation that individuals are too multi-socialized and too multi-determined to be conscious of the determinism that is acting on them. Sociologically, or logically, it is inevitable, then, that individuals strongly resist the notion that there is a social determinism. Individuals may have the feeling that the behavior they engage in is freely chosen, because there is a considerable chance that they are plural in nature and that different ‘forces’ act upon them according to the social situations in which they find themselves.

In a certain way, this complex and subtle idea of how social determinism affects behavior has been touched upon already in a specific form of literature, in particular by Marcel Proust. He laid the groundwork for a theory of the plurality of ‘egos’ in every individual (Lahire, 1998: 43–46, 2002: 398–400). In his *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, the novelist developed a mode of writing that not only displays the plurality of individual heritages and identities, but also provides an example of an ‘individual sociology’ that is subtly determinist in nature (Dubois, 1997: 130).

In sum, we may experience discomforts, crises, or personal rifts with the social world, because (i) each one of us may be a bearer of a multiplicity of dispositions which do not always find the contexts in which they can be actualized (*unsaturated internal plurality*), (ii) because we may lack the right dispositions to allow us to confront certain situations that are more or less inevitable in our social and multi-

differentiated world (*problematic external plurality*), and (iii) because the multiple social investments we make in family, profession, friendships, etc., which are objectively possible, may turn out to be incompatible with one another (*plurality of investments or problematic engagements*). Feelings of loneliness, incomprehension, frustration, or discomfort may be primarily products of the (inevitable) gap between what the social world objectively allows us to ‘express’ at a given moment and what it has put in us during our past socialization. Since we are bearers of dispositions, capabilities, knowledge and durably skills, which for objective social reasons are sometimes on standby only, we may experience a discomfort that generally manifests itself by the illusion that our ‘authentic ego’—seen as ‘personal’ and, therefore, as non-social—does not find its place in the coercive framework of society. This framework is then experienced as a set of social norms that are strange to us. This situation favors a reinforcement of the illusion that there is a ‘heart of hearts’ or an ‘intimate’, and authentic, ego that is independent of any social framework. However, in fact, this feeling is nurtured by the rift or the disjunction between what society has left within us and the possibilities it offers to mobilize the array of our dispositions and capabilities at a particular point of time. Conversely, situations of crisis may be caused by the multiple occasions of maladjustment or separation between what we have internalized and what situations demand from us. Such crises pertain to ontological relations of involvement and of connivance between the embodied past and the new situation. Since individuals lack the gift of ubiquity, they may suffer from the multiplicity of the social investments they have to make and which, in the end, may contradict or compete with one another. Because the world we live in now is differentiated and because we are bearers of (more or less) plural dispositions and capabilities, we may experience these greater or lesser worries that sometimes overwhelm our lives. These troubles and discomforts, which have social causes, are the preferred objects of study of a sociology at the level of the individual.

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**Bernard Lahire** is Professor of sociology at the École Normale Supérieure Lettres et sciences humaines of Lyon and director of the “Groupe de Recherche sur la Socialisation (CNRS). He has published several books, among others *L'Homme pluriel* (Nathan, 1998), *L'Invention de l'“illettrisme”* (La Découverte, 1999) et *Portraits sociologiques* (Nathan, 2002). At present he is working on inter- and intra-individual variations in cultural behavior, on the one hand and on the internalization of cultural hierarchies during childhood and adolescence, on the other.