Bourdieu's Field Theory, as a Theoretical Framework for Analyzing the Process of Degree Completion in Graduate Education[1]

La teoría de los campos de Bourdieu, como esquema teórico de análisis del proceso de graduación en posgrado

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Abstract

The article presents a scheme for the analysis of degree completion. This scheme is the result of research on the graduation of students with a Master's degree in Pedagogy at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in 2003. Theoretical support comes from two sources: Arredondo and Sánchez Puentes (2000 and 2004), who affirm that graduation is a formative process that initiates with incorporation in the program and culminates with degree conferral; and Bourdieu, who helps to understand the factors that affect integration through concepts like field, cultural capital and *habitus*. The empirical data comes from interviews with students, graduates, advisors, and the graduate program staff. The article emphasizes the way in which the cultural capital and *habitus* affect education and impede

graduation, and exposes some of the mechanisms of exclusion in the educational processes.

Key words: Completion rate, graduation, academic career, master's degree, degree completion, fields theory.

Resumen

El artículo presenta un esquema para el análisis de la graduación. Dicho esquema es el resultado de una investigación de la graduación de los estudiantes de la Maestría en Pedagogía de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México en el 2003. El sustento teórico proviene de dos fuentes: Arredondo y Sánchez Puentes (2000 y 2004), que afirman que la graduación es un proceso de formación que inicia con la incorporación al programa y culmina con la obtención del grado; y de Bourdieu que nos ayuda a entender los factores que inciden en la integración a través de conceptos como campo, capital cultural y *habitus*. El referente empírico proviene de entrevistas a estudiantes, egresados, graduados, tutores y funcionarios del programa. El artículo destaca la forma en que el capital cultural y del *habitus* afectan la formación e impiden la graduación, y expone algunos de los mecanismos de exclusión imbricados en los procesos de formación.

Palabras clave: Graduación, grado de maestría, teoría de los campos.

Introduction

Graduation and degree conferral for students of higher education present a problem that significantly affects many educational institutions, including the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). According to studies by various researchers, the low completion rate at the undergraduate level has been an established tradition since the 1960s with percentages of 19% (Garza, 1986, p. 15). Although legislative and curriculum modifications were made during the 1980s and '90s, the situation persists, and in 1998 the completion rate for a Bachelor's degree was under 40%. The problem extends to graduate studies which present similar completion rates with a 10% graduation rate and a time-to-degree which can exceed nine years (Rojas Argüelles, Aguilar del Valle and Valle Gómez Tagle, 1992).

Despite the seriousness of the situation, for many years the low number of students who were awarded a degree merely represented an internal problem and was not considered a relevant point for assessing the academic quality of the institution or for receiving financing. However, starting in the 1990s, the policies of educational excellence and quality have emphasized (among other factors) the completion rate of institutions, considered an indicator of *optimization* of resources and minimization of the waste entailed in student attrition. Graduation has ceased to be seen as an internal matter and has become one of the many elements that condition financial support and determine the quality of the institution and of its graduates.

Given the importance of completion rates for academic recognition and financial support, studies have focused on the analysis of graduation through quantitative research (Cejudo, Meza and Robles, 1990; Licea de Arenas and Valles, 1994; Cortés, 1997) in which the problem is addressed in terms of statistical data: socioeconomic studies that define the constraints that affect the academic development of students (Covo, 1979; Granja, 1983); economic research on the value of a college degree or the enhanced value of graduate degrees (Esquivel, 1991) and psychological analyses that correlate the problem to the subjective characteristics of the students (Arce, 1993). However, the institutional and pedagogical factors involved in the problem are yet to be defined; neither have there been analyses of the way said factors support or limit the possibility of graduating. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to open the debate and propose a theoretical framework for the analysis of degree completion in graduate students.

Method

This proposal is the result of empirical theoretical research conducted in the Master's Program in Pedagogy at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). The theoretical referent comes from two sources:

- Arredondo, Sánchez Puentes, Piña and Pontón (2004), authors who highlight the importance of considering degree completion as a formative process, and
- Bourdieu, whose concepts of *cultural capital*, *habitus* and *field* contribute to an understanding of the factors that affect the student's integration in graduate education.

Empirical data were obtained through interviews with 24 students who are graduates of the program. This information was triangulated through 10 interviews with advisors and the coordinator of the Graduate Program in Pedagogy. The mutual tension between the theoretical and empirical referents enabled us to construct the research object, from which the following framework for analysis was taken.

Degree completion as a formative process

Normally a student's graduation is related to the production of a thesis or dissertation and the conferral of a degree. This view overlooks the fact that for this work to be potentially possible it is necessary to consider all the factors, practices and processes that enable the student to complete the degree. Among proposals with such an approach is that of Arredondo, Sánchez Puentes, Piña y Pontón (2004), who regard graduation as a formative educational process that begins with enrollment in the program and culminates with the awarding of a degree; it touches on and transcends all the processes and pedagogical practices that the student experiences throughout his academic trajectory. Thus, graduation ceases to be a product (thesis) and instead becomes an educational process, a process of transformation that prepares the subject for the development of a thesis. This

change takes place gradually through different educational activities, which is why the authors attach such weight to everyday life in the institution.

One decisive factor for the success of the academic career is the student's adequate academic and social integration. This is measured by the frequency and intensity of exchanges between subjects, an element that contributes to the circulation of knowledge and the integration of a web of relationships and ties. This web is academic life. It is suggested that the more frequent and intense are the exchanges between the agents involved, the better the educational outcomes and the completion rate (Arredondo and Santa María, 2004). When we speak of *agents*, we refer to the students, advisors and staff of an educational program; thus graduation is no longer the result of an individual effort, and instead has become a learning and intersubjective process which involves the individual and the academic, institutional and administrative aspects in which all the participants intervene.

Within the academic trajectory towards degree attainment, students traverse four interrelated processes:

a) **Incorporation.** This is the first step for entry in the program and for becoming integrated into academic and social life. It refers to the contacts established by an individual in order to enter a group and remain in it. The success of this phase depends on the fit between the qualities and characteristics that the institution demands of the student in relation to her biography and personal features and her expectations of what the institution has to offer (Pontón and Jasso 2000). If any of these elements is incongruous, incorporation becomes difficult and the possibilities of educational outcomes and graduation are reduced.

b) **Socialization.** In a first research study, Piña (2000), based on Maffesoli (1990), refers to a process of *sociality* that gives marked importance to the establishment of ties and relationships between the members of a graduate program, as a means of fostering the exchange of concepts and knowledge that contribute to the transformation of the person into a subject with a specific cultural capital, such as a teacher. Sociality provides an entertaining form of socialization through exchanges between group members (Maffesoli, 1990), a position that places emphasis on developing bonds between subjects as a way of promoting integration. In graduate school this is understood as the establishment of ties and relationships that encourage the social and academic integration of students in the program.

In a later paper, Piña (2004) refers to a process of socialization, based on Bourdieu, and stresses the importance of transmitting and incorporating the researcher's vocation and *habitus* as a means of supporting the student's formative development and graduation. Thus, through intellectual, social and affective exchanges, the *habitus* is strongly linked to the acquisition of the knowledge and skills that are indispensable for becoming an M. A. or PhD. It should be noted that

although both socialization and *habitus* involve contact with others and the transformation of the subject, they emphasize different aspects: the first gives priority to integrative ties and the second to the acquisition of *habitus.* In our case, we start from the concept of socialization as a means of incorporating values, knowledge and practices that allow students to become integrated into a group and begin the knowledge building that will contribute to the formation and development of the thesis—since it is viewed as the element that most affects graduation—without overlooking the importance of integrative ties.

c) **Mentoring.** This is the backbone of academic training, the means for transmitting the theoretical, practical and ethical knowledge that is helpful for the development of the thesis (Sánchez Puentes and Arredondo, 2000). Sánchez Puentes (2000) distinguishes four types of mentoring or advising, based on its purpose, whether it be to: 1) train researchers, 2) teach research, 3) develop the thesis and 4) support the academic career.

The first refers to the transmission of the researcher's vocation, which can only occur with an apprenticeship approach—through direct learning on the part of the student who assists the mentor in a research project. This process involves the mentor's knowledge and experience in research, as well as the pedagogical skill for a direct teaching approach, with the student's participation (Sánchez Puentes, 1987). This profile was developed in various graduate programs of the Academic Unit for Professional and Graduate Level Studies (UACPYP, abbreviation in Spanish) of the UNAM and other science-oriented schools in which students were integrated into research projects under the guidance of a mentor who provides activities to foster this integration, as well as support for the academic career and thesis development.

The second type of mentoring is related to research training and consists of orientation on different research options and methods. The learning in this type of advising is neither straightforward nor practical.

The third type is normally associated with the figure of the *advisor,* who has the task of directing the student in the development of her thesis or dissertation, which usually consists of critical reading of research advances.

Finally, the fourth type is support for the student's academic career, which includes providing support in the choice of educational activities. Adequate academic guidance during the school trajectory, the development of the thesis or dissertation and research training all contribute in some way to degree completion and graduation.

d) **Graduation.** This refers to the conditions and institutional requirements for remaining in the program, and the accreditation and certification that are necessary for degree attainment. The success of this endeavor depends on the three previously mentioned processes, i.e. incorporation, socialization and

mentoring. The authors emphasize the importance of the student's interest in and commitment to completing the degree.

Graduation depends on the coordination of these processes and adjustment of the characteristics of the agents, institutional conditions and study programs. However, it is not clear how the motivation that will make individuals more or less likely to graduate is created, or how the transfer of applications, knowledge and habits that will allow the students' academic and social integration is achieved. For this reason, we turn to Bourdieu's (1987, 1988, 1991) ideas of *field theory* and the concept of *habitus* to understand how the processes of integration or exclusion can take place.

Field theory is a theoretical construct consisting of a triad of elements: field, capital and *habitus* (Wacquant, 2004). Some of the elements that help to understand degree completion as a formative process are revisited here.

The concept of field

Bourdieu defines the concept of field as a set of power relations between agents or institutions in the struggle for specific forms of domination and monopoly of an efficient type of capital (Gutiérrez, 1997). This space is characterized by relations of alliance among its members, who are on a quest to obtain the most benefit and impose as legitimate that which defines them as a group; and by confrontation of groups and individuals in the search to improve their positions or exclude groups. The position depends on the type, volume and legitimacy of the capital and the *habitus* that the subjects have acquired over the course of their lives, and how these vary over time. Hence, *field*, *capital* and *habitus* are concepts that are connected.

Fields consist of producers, consumers, distributors of goods and legitimating and regulatory bodies, whose characteristics, rules and conformation vary according to their history and relation to the field of power.

Therefore, the *academic field* is understood as a complex space composed of producers (researchers and academics), distributors (professors and disseminating bodies), consumers (students, researchers and scholars), legitimating entities and distributors of goods (universities and research institutes). The efficient capital is the cultural capital that can be acquired by students and legitimated through degrees and diplomas. Moreover, this cultural capital can be transformed into capital that is symbolic of recognition when it accumulates and the groups in power acknowledge it; then the individuals ascend to an elevated position and acquire the recognition and capacity to define what is *legitimate* and *valuable* in the circle in which they operate.

Some master's programs can be thought of as entities that distribute and legitimate academic degrees. The enrollment and incorporation of students would be determined by the cultural capital and *habitus* that they possess. This space, as

suggested by the notion of field, lies in the midst of alliances and struggles for domination of the symbolic power to name what is legitimate in the education of students, the production of research and of theses. These elements can help us understand the factors that influence whether there is more or less academic integration as well as degree completion. Of these elements, forms of entry and movements stand out.

Entry into the field is regulated according to rules imposed by the dominant positions that attempt to determine the possession of capital and the prevailing *habitus*. This separates and defines the legitimate members from the upstarts. The scarcer these rules are, the greater will be the protection and value that they provide for their members, whereas less rigid rules will tend to reduce the level of prestige and to structure selective measures from less explicit places. In regard to study programs, rules are set through explicit admissions requirements, which demand a certain type and volume of cultural capital.

Cultural capital

Cultural capital refers to the set of knowledge and skills which an individual possesses. It is not distributed evenly and cannot be acquired instantly, making its procurement difficult and putting its owners in an advantageous position in relation to those who lack it and cannot immediately obtain it. According to Bourdieu (1987), cultural capital can be found in three states:

a) **Embodied state.** This refers to the type of dispositions, knowledge, ideas, values and skills that are acquired by agents throughout the course of their socialization, and which cannot be accumulated beyond their capacity (Bourdieu, 1987). Here he makes reference to the wealth of knowledge incorporated by the student during his academic trajectory, which will enable her to integrate into academia. The embodied state of cultural capital depends on the spaces, interests and meanings that the student has gradually incorporated, so their level and type may vary from one person to another. A part of this kind of cultural capital can be objectified verbally or in writing, hence the admission requirement for some graduate programs is to produce an essay or other writing assignment or a research project that offers a glimpse of this capital.

b) **Objectified state.** This state comprises all objectified cultural goods such as books, magazines and theories which can be appropriated (Bourdieu, 1987). While this form of capital is not considered an admission requirement, the propensity to consume it is an important value for acquiring new knowledge that will increase the embodied cultural capital. It is a value in the field, since its possession and consumption are important for education.

c) **Institutionalized state.** This can be found in academic degrees, which confer recognition on the institutionalized cultural capital and provide a different type

of consecration in accordance with the prestige of the issuing institution (Bourdieu, 1987). It is the form of capital which is normally requested to enroll in a master's program; with it the subjects demonstrate that they possess the knowledge of the previous academic level and may be incorporated into postgraduate studies. We should bear in mind that the possession of credentials is not always accompanied by the same level or volume of embodied capital, as we can find students with many degrees or diplomas but with a deficient education.

The capital which the subject possesses—in any of its states—varies according to the position held in the social space in which she operates, as well as the trajectory, volume and legitimate character—or lack thereof—of these acquisitions. The wide variety of levels gives the students a position: the greater the volume and legitimacy of their cultural capital, they will be considered *bright* or *capable* and they will have greater possibilities of integration and development. When the possession of cultural capital is less, there may be major difficulties in the students' education since they lack the necessary capital to become integrated and participate in the games of the field. Consequently, admission to a graduate program is determined by the possession of embodied and institutionalized cultural capital, and the propensity to read books, qualities which support the possibility of integration and academic development. In addition to these elements, there is another that is not always explicitly mentioned, but which is an element of selection: *habitus*.

Habitus

Habitus is another element necessary for entry into a particular cultural field. It is made up of the mental schemata and practices that result from the incorporation of visions and objective social divisions that configure principles of difference and membership in certain fields (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1995). One of its features is that it endows the subject with the skills and values needed for entry into a group, confers the ability to move, act and take a position or a strategic orientation in a situation without it being necessary to establish a plan of action, because all these are the result of a series of dispositions embodied in the course of a trajectory (Gutiérrez, 1997). In this sense, *habitus* refers to a practical learning that is neither conscious nor deliberate, as it is acquired through the embodiment of the practices, visions and values of the social space in which subjects operate. This is sometimes forgotten and has, as a result, led to the association of the concept with something innate, whereas in reality it refers to something whose incorporation was involuntary, through the process of socialization.

This social learning is acquired in the course of a life, so the characteristics and competence level of the subject depend on the place where he grew up and the different ways he has to assimilate and give meaning and value to facts. Thus it is said that it is a way to subjectivize the social dimension (Pinto, 2002), so that it is different from one subject and one field to another. By varying the *habitus* from

one field to another, the possibility of further integration depends on the compatibility between the *habitus* prevailing in a field and that which is possessed by the subject.

In graduate school this could translate as the skills and dispositions that are considered ideal, such as knowing how to read, analyze, investigate and write, which are presumed to be the capacities required for admission to a graduate program. When students possess these skills, it is because they have developed them throughout their trajectories, and they are indicative of a high level of competence and the congruence of their *habitus*, which will provide them with greater possibilities of integration. In other words, here we would speak of "bright" students.

In contrast, when students do not possess these characteristic and their *habitus* are different or incongruent they will have greater difficulties in developing and integrating into academic activities, thereby reducing their possibilities of graduating since they do not have the required academic level and will be forced to acquire it belatedly. This could represent a different level of competence compared with those who have developed such competence from childhood.

The acquisition of these skills is not simple, given that it requires a process of conversion of *habitus*, an activity involving interest, time, the support of mentors and adjustment in the manner of inculcation (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1998). This takes effort and may have an impact on the time-to-degree or lead to attrition, if the student's difficulties increase and there is no support available. *Habitus*, as a practical principle of membership in a group, can help in understanding the factors affecting the degree of integration in a graduate program and the probability of completion as well as the mentoring practices.

Within habitus, according to Louis Pinto (2002), four dimensions can be distinguished:

a) **The dispositional dimension.** This comprises a praxeological and an affective part. The first involves dispositions and practical skills, acquired within a trajectory. These provide a practical sense for knowing how to perform certain activities, without necessarily having been taught them, since they are the product of the internalization of conditions and pre-existing mental schemata, which are acquired unintentionally. This contributes to the source of their inculcation being forgotten, thus leading to their appearing to be innate *gifts* (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1998), as in the case of knowing how to write, research, read, search and interpret texts and construct a thesis. These skills vary from one individual to another, but all are key elements for academic development at the graduate level; being in possession of them furthers the student's integration and training; lacking them, the student will face problems in her academic development, having to acquire them belatedly and sometimes without reaching the same level of competence as the more advanced students.

This practical sense also extends to the ability to develop a thesis and take advantage of the different resources and educational spaces for integrating knowledge, qualities that promote degree completion and graduation. When it is absent, there is a notable decrease in educational processes: the functions of knowledge and how it operates are unclear to the student and certain activities are not performed properly, resulting in a tendency to accumulate information without knowing what to do with it and how to express it properly. Moreover, in the mentoring sessions, this practical sense—when it is present—provides the advisors with a greater possibility for addressing the different issues involved in students' education and in the direction and evaluation of the thesis.

The affective part of this dispositional dimension is related to the tastes and aspirations of the subjects, preferences that guide their interests and practices. In the case of the students, those whose *habitus* coincides with the field tend to practice reading and academic activities, participate in the field and pursue academic degrees, as part of a disposition formed throughout their trajectory, not only as a result of contextual factors or a sense of obligation. Conversely, those students who are inclined in another direction or have incongruous characteristics will find no pleasure in these activities and will not aspire greatly to a degree, which can reduce the efforts made to participate and overcome the obstacles that arise as a part of each of these processes. For an advisor, this can lead to less inclination to train the students, depending on the emotions and values that have been embodied throughout the trajectory.

b) **The distributive dimension.** As has been mentioned, subjects' habitus varies according to their position in the field. This provides a perception of the place they occupy, the things that are desirable to them and the characteristics of the space, as well as the different relations—distant or close—with the rest of the subjects (Pinto, 2002). In this sense, this dimension gives the subject a perspective of the world consistent with her position, the expectations which—being *natural* for the group—are possible for her (Bourdieu, 1991), as well as defining the things that are impossible for her place and characteristics; i.e., the things that should be kept at a distance. The construction of these expectations is the result of the embodiment of social structures, where power relations appear natural, a consequence of objective structures, creating an order in which the subject can find her and others' places. This perception of the world is seen to be affirmed by the material conditions in which individuals operate.

In terms of graduate studies, these elements could be understood to be the vision that the students have of studying and graduating as something possible or even natural, as part of the dispositions embodied in their groups of origin; for others, however, such studies could appear as something difficult because of the academic or material conditions in which they were raised. Thus they perceive remaining in the program and graduating as impossible to achieve, since the requirements exceed their *possibilities*, according to their cultural capital and their practical dispositions.

The perception that one is lacking in ability is a source of self-elimination. Subjects assume that they do not possess the aptitude for academic development and consequently they quit graduate school, since "it's not for them" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1998).

In the case of the advisors, depending on their *habitus*, they will tend to approach students that they consider to be closer to them within their social space and who have academic potential. Conversely, they will maintain their distance from those with lesser cultural capital and *habitus*; that is, those who are more distant from them.

c) **The economic dimension.** This is characterized by the handling of symbolic goods of capital through the subject's interest and sense of the game within the field. Interest is defined as a propensity or belief that what is at stake in the field has worth (Bourdieu, 2003); therefore, there is a strong inclination to value practices and languages. The subject acquires this inclination throughout his trajectory and from the milieus where he develops, and in accordance with his objective conditions he will then select the alternatives that are considered to be most closely tied to his interests and position; in this sense, the disposition does not refer to a rational choice (Gutiérrez, 1997). Conversely, for those outside these spaces, what is at stake does not make sense, they do not ascribe value to it and they do not know the principles on which it is based. Therefore, they have less knowledge of the rules and standards of the field, are less willing to assign value to this type of activity and devote time to it (Bourdieu, 1999). These aspects assist in understanding how a goal is set and why some subjects are interested in graduating, as a part of their learned dispositions, interests and group values, whereas for others it doesn't have the same value.

It should be noted that the likelihood of being carried away by the game of the field also depends on the objective opportunities which, sometimes, mark a limit to one's possibilities of investing in education. The interest in participating in the field is created depending on the position and the trajectory, through the unintentional incorporation of the values, preferences and practices of the group to which one belongs (Bourdieu, 1991). That is why, for those that have found their place in a social space, and have highly internalized these qualities, it is said that they *were born in the field.*

These preferences are not created automatically or by choice, they are the result of a long process of inculcation. Thus, for those who weren't *born in the field* or who *developed outside it*, their acquisition is difficult, requiring a process that amounts to a second birth, in which the values and meanings of the field can be gradually acquired. This gradual process has the disadvantage of lengthening trajectories (Bourdieu, 1991). This can be seen in those students whose parents or their membership groups are connected to the academic field; they have a strong disposition to ascribe value to a degree and the circulation of cultural capital, all of

which coincide to urge them towards graduation, in contrast with those whose appreciation of the field is reduced to a means of economic mobility and who have less sense and possibilities of investing in their educational formation.

The economic dimension of *habitus* provides the interest in investing in education and furnishes, at the same time, a sense of the game within the field. It consists of embodied practical knowledge that helps subjects choose those objects, practices and processes which will enable them to make the most of their investment, achieve better standing and position themselves where there is value, while respecting the rules and regularities of the field (Bourdieu, 1991).

The knowledge of how to act within the field, or even to anticipate movements is not intentional, it is a skill that is developed through the incorporation of practices and objective spaces, and the configuration of cognitive structures. The degree of sense of the game varies according to the position of the subject in a social space and her trajectory, so those who were born in the field and have internalized it more have more elements to their advantage since they know the unwritten rules. Meanwhile, those who are newly incorporated find it challenging to learn these non-explicit rules, making their integration more difficult (Bourdieu, 1999a). In graduate studies this implies knowing how to acquire an education and obtain greater benefits that will contribute to a rapid academic trajectory. In this respect, there are students who are more likely to invest in their education and have contacts, relationships and activities that contribute to their trajectory and the development of their thesis. Those students who did not have the opportunity to acquire these skills, on the other hand, or who acquired them at a later stage, have more difficulties and are less able to take advantage of their education; they don't know the rules and make mistakes, causing delays in their trajectories (Bourdieu, 1990).

In mentoring, the sense of the game allows the advisors to guide the students with the greatest educational possibilities and focus their efforts on these students, designing educational strategies according to each profile, dealing with the difficulties that arise in the course of the mentoring and in the evaluation of the thesis.

It should be noted that for Bourdieu and Wacquant (1995), agents are not *pre-occupied* beforehand with the results of their actions; this occurs to the extent that they are predisposed by *habitus*, distinguishing this theory from a perspective based on calculation and deliberate interest in a particular benefit, where acts are carried out in accordance with immediate external factors. Nevertheless, in the configuration and modification of these dispositions, sometimes external conditions intervene, making it necessary to modify aspirations and create strategies to avoid being "declassed".

d) **The categorial dimension.** This dimension is concerned with the ordering of the world, the formative power of schemata of perception and of common sense, which enable subjects to solve problems on a day-to-day basis (Pinto, 2002). It relates to the scale of assessments and values held by individuals.

This dimension defines the values and conditions pursuant to membership in the social group (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1995), identifying the important elements that define *what ought to be* and that which is worth fighting for. To this end, the forms, goods and characteristics to which the subject should aspire are established, among them education. So, for some groups academic degrees are highly important and are seen as the *natural* destiny of their members, whereas other groups perceive such studies as having nothing to do with them (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1973). However, it is important to take into account that the context has created a tendency to pursue academic degrees as a means of social mobility, an interest created by the milieu and which at times can be disconnected from the subject's *natural* inclinations. Albeit, the interest in graduating occasionally surpasses the influence of the context and corresponds to group values with which the subjects were raised and which were internalized at that time.

As regards mentoring, this dimension relates to the form, the attributes and the values that academics suppose their advisory activity should have. Those who—from the perspective of the *habitus* of the field—consider this activity as a fundamental part of their work to which they are committed as an *ought to be*, will be more likely to devote time and effort to the training of students, an academic commitment that transcends a purely employment oriented approach. In contrast, advisors who have not quite internalized the *habitus* will tend to view this practice as an adjunct to their activity, will feel minimally committed to the task and devote less time to it, thereby negatively impacting graduation.

The congruence of *habitus* in its different dimensions comprises an element of integration in the field that favors education and integration far beyond a rational calculation, because it represents a highly internalized value and disposition of students and advisors. However, not everyone can claim to possess these qualities and characteristics, so the incongruities of one's *habitus*, combined with reduced cultural capital, are factors that hinder integration into the academic field as well as degree completion, since subjects do not have the academic and practical elements needed to cope with the demands of the institution.

It should be pointed out that *habitus* and the level of cultural capital are not a question of fate; they can be acquired provided that there is interest and effort on the part of the agent, adaptation to the manner of inculcation and support from someone with interest in educating the individual. The problem with a belated acquisition of *habitus* is that this will result in slower trajectories and, sometimes, lower levels of competence than those who acquired the *habitus* from childhood.

Once in the graduate program, agents are classified in different positions, corresponding to the volume, weight and development of their capitals and dispositions. This order, as regards the students, has several consequences in terms of their education and graduation. The place assigned, in the case of students who are considered "bright", will imply the possibility that advisors will invest time and effort in their training, since they represent a good bet in relation to their possibilities of integration and graduation. Meanwhile, for those whose abilities are not considered valuable, advisors will have less interest and give them less attention, resulting in a strong probability of attrition on the part of such students when faced with the challenges and loneliness of the process.

In the case of the advisors, places are assigned pursuant to an academic appointment as well as the prestige and recognition obtained in the field. In speaking of the position of the advisors, we are referring to an objective place, while recognizing that their symbolic capital confers a distinct *status* in relations.

Students' different starting points denote different possibilities for graduation; nonetheless, positions are not static, but are in constant interaction and movement, as subjects seek recognition, promotion or even the exclusion of others.

In the field, different types of relations are established, among which alliances and strategies of exclusion stand out. With respect to alliances, agents establish exchanges with members in similar positions that allow them to form coalitions in order to secure support and mutual recognition for what they are and what they produce (Bourdieu, 2000). This can be seen in advisors who establish collaborations for the review and evaluation of theses in which they tend to give recognition to the work of the student and of their fellow advisor when these are members of their group. In students these ties are found in the creation of working groups or friends that enhance the sense of belonging to the institution and foster the circulation of knowledge. Whatever their form, alliances between those of equal position serve the purpose of maintaining these positions as well as promoting the acquisition of greater benefits.

Nevertheless, not all exchanges take place between equals; there is also collaboration between those in unequal positions, allowing the procurement of support. One of the agents proffers more than the other can return, or gives it from a higher position, producing a situation of symbolic domination which generates in the student a debt of gratitude toward the advisor due to the former's inability to return the support (Bourdieu, 1999c). As an example, we can find mentoring where the professor and the student are placed in asymmetrical positions in relation to knowledge and recognition, yet they are joined in the formulation and direction of a thesis. This represents a generous act on the part of the advisor who is training the student, in which both symbolic domination and a debt of gratitude impossible to repay emerge, and which in some cases, transforms the affective relationships.

This domination is present in all mentoring relationships, but can be handled in different ways. In any case, an adjustment and congruence of *habitus* and expectations between both agents is desirable in order to ease the incorporation of the student in the mentoring process. Otherwise a struggle will ensue that will interfere with the educational process and could lead to alienation.

Another type of relationship that is established between the mentor and the student is in the training of researchers using an apprenticeship approach, by incorporating them in research projects where the student learns directly through the use of practical sense (Sánchez Puentes, 1987), an arrangement which also contributes to the development of the thesis. This training is occasionally accompanied by an unconscious idea of training students to succeed the researchers, with the students eventually becoming their "intellectual children". As in the family, sometimes there is cordiality and occasionally there are rifts when the rules of the group or the authority of the advisor are not accepted. This style of training is the most conducive to the preparation of researchers; however, it is a privilege available to a select group that regards itself as having the necessary capacity.

So far we have discussed alliances and mutual aid between subjects; however, in graduate school subjects also establish relations of competition that seek the exclusion or disqualification of other members. These relationships involve members from similar positions and asymmetrical places. To give an example of such a scenario, a group of professors—subjects who are in the same objective place in the program—who have academic, personal or political differences among themselves, are evaluating a thesis as members of the advisory committee. There is a possibility that these conflicts could be transferred to the student's work as a result of a tendency to disqualify the content and value of the work and, by extension, the advisory work as well, by means of negative assessments, in an attempt to devalue the colleague's work. Such comments have symbolic power when uttered by someone with prestige or authority, who, from a higher position imposes his vision of what the thesis *is* or *ought to be*, and whose symbolic power to consecrate or disqualify becomes a weapon for eliminating, excluding or decreasing the symbolic capital of other subjects and their products.

Another form of exclusion can be found in the unequal positions between tutor and students in the educational process, through four mechanisms:

1. **Failure to teach *habitus*.** Educational programs are based on the premise that all students, on entering, share a foundation of common knowledge, a condition that is not always fulfilled, because on occasion the admission procedures are lax and students lacking the proper qualifications enroll, having, as a result, a high probability of facing challenges in their academic integration. The educational space assumes that all students possess the same knowledge and abilities and therefore ignores the teaching of certain skills that are important for integration. So those who lack such skills are unable to achieve the same level of integration and consequently are excluded with the argument that their lack of capacity is the cause of poor reception of the "best messages"

(those of the professors) by the "worst receivers" (the students who do not understand them) (Bourdieu *et al.*, 1998, p.162). This condition is accepted as legitimate because it conceals the social origin of the appropriations and abilities and reduces the differences to *natural* capacities (Bourdieu). A distributive part of the subject's habitus collaborates in this self-exclusion, causing him to recognize that *this is not for him* and to distance himself accordingly.

Of the knowledge which graduate programs frequently neglect to teach, one such skill concerns the ways in which a thesis can be developed. In many cases it is assumed that the student is already familiar with this process from practice at a previous academic level, and therefore guidance on this aspect—or on how to take advantage of educational spaces—is not necessary. The problem is that many students develop the thesis for their undergraduate degree (which in academic level is far removed from the master's level) with little skill; they do not possess the practical sense to develop a thesis, they do not know the rules or how to start. So the complexity, the lack of guidance and academic isolation in which they learn can contribute to postponing the writing of the thesis.

On the other hand, while inculcation of *habitus* could help with integration and the task of developing a master's thesis, teaching it requires time, interest and effort on the part of both agents, and at times involves remedying deficiencies from previous academic levels. This work is arduous and there is not always a willingness to perform it, which can lengthen the student's time-to-completion and undermine the objectives of graduate school.

2. **Language.** When subjects do not possess the capital and linguistic abilities to enable them to appropriate meanings and understand and exchange them, they are unable to integrate into the group (Bourdieu, 1997). This aspect is essential for it is through language that one constructs meanings, ideas and concepts that contribute to the academic integration, training and knowledge building that can be objectified in a thesis. The absence of linguistic capital and forms of expression constitute a fence that gradually marginalizes the subjects, who are unable to understand anything and consider dropping out as a natural consequence of a lack of ability.

   This mechanism also involves disciplinary schemes of thought that mark patterns of expression and which, if not shared, limit the possibilities of integration and knowledge building and negatively impact graduation. The same occurs with those who belong to the space, but do not possess sufficient cultural and linguistic capital to be incorporated in the field.

For tutoring, the difference of languages hinders integration and dialogue, since there is no common foundation for knowledge sharing. This situation has several possible solutions: one is that the advisor and the student make a joint effort to adjust their forms of expression; otherwise, lacking the elements for dialogue and

the interest to overcome these obstacles, a breach may appear between them which will affect opportunities for education and graduation.

3. **Stigmatization.** The purpose of this mechanism is the pejorative designation of an agent in relation to the interests of the dominant group. It diminishes the agent's symbolic capital and can marginalize his academic, institutional or political activity in the field. This denomination is considered legitimate when issued by a group with authority (Bourdieu, 1988). The stigma can be made by reference to the theoretical, disciplinary or institutional environment to which the agent belongs, through the disqualification of his products. This disqualification attempts to impose a principle of distinction consistent with subjects found in the highest category. For students this could take the form of the group pressure applied to "mediocre" students who are excluded from the group dynamic by peers and advisors, impeding their integration and education and possibly leading to their dropping out of graduate school. The pejorative designation can also refer to membership in academic or political groups with which the advisor does not agree and, in labeling the student, her potential value is diminished and she can be disposed of.

4. **Invalidity.** This is the action of ignoring what an agent says or does; as the agent is then alone, without an interlocutor, her integration is difficult, causing withdrawal from graduate studies. It can be perceived in the mentoring process when subjects fail to establish a bond between each other; there is no support on the part of the advisor and the student is left alone. If the student knows how to deal with it and is interested in completing her degree, she will continue in isolation, but if she has no idea how to proceed, or if the task presented to her is too complex, she will tend to postpone it, or not do it at all.

This mechanism is found in another form during the evaluation phase of the thesis, through the exercise of symbolic power in the form of repeated delays in the review process, slowing the progress of the work and possibly inducing a loss of motivation to continue. This form of exclusion is less obvious, but by no means less effective, since, given the lack of attention from their advisors, the agents accept their impotence, and sometimes bail out.

Final comments

The concepts of *habitus* and *field* provide an idea of the mechanisms that affect students' social and academic integration through socially learned and unintentionally acquired dispositions and indicate how they can contribute to education and graduation.

In accordance with the previous statement, this paper supports the position of Arredondo and Sánchez Puentes (2004) that graduate degree completion is a formative educational process which starts with incorporation in a graduate

program and culminates with degree attainment. During this journey the subjects are acquiring the knowledge necessary to be awarded a master's degree, but these acquisitions depend on the congruence between the volume and type of cultural capital and *habitus* that they possess and that which the institution demands. In this respect, it is assumed that those students whose qualities are congruent with what the educational institution demands, will have greater possibilities to become integrated and trained, whereas those who lack these attributes will have more difficulties building cultural capital and the practical sense that will help them develop their thesis.

The importance of personal attributes (cultural capital and *habitus*) for integration does not mean that the problem of degree completion will be resolved simply by raising the admissions requirements for graduate students, for this would merely increase selectivity. On the contrary, we propose that the problem be viewed from the perspective of the different aspects involved, particularly those related to formative training.

It is important to keep in mind that education is an intersubjective process, whose outcomes depend on the frequency and intensity of the interactions between participants. Exchanges and relations may be for the purpose of forging alliances or on occasion for the exclusion of its members, through mechanisms such as failure to teach *habitus*, the use of specialized language, stigmatization and invalidity. These unconscious mechanisms act as regulating and eliminatory elements on those who do not possess cultural capital or the required *habitus*. For this reason, occasionally there will be some agents that pass through the program and manage to complete seminars and courses and build a certain cultural background, but because they lack the practical sense for the development of a thesis or dissertation, will fail to complete their degree and graduate. Accordingly, it seems that there are different moments of selection: upon entering the graduate program and during the entire course of the different educational practices, a condition which significantly affects the number of graduates.

To all of the above-mentioned problems it is important to add the institutional conditions and the individual's personal situation, which in many cases limit educational practices and the time devoted to them.

As can be seen, degree completion is a complex problem that is only partially accessible. For the many questions which have yet to be answered, we extend an invitation to open the debate.

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