Field – Capital Theory and its Implications for Marketing

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Abstract

Purpose

This paper explores the applicability and implications of Bourdieu's Field-Capital theory to marketing using original research with a typical European society. Bourdieu's Field – Capital theory proposes that people acquire economic, social and cultural capital which they deploy in social arenas known as 'fields' in order to compete for positions of distinction and status. This exploratory study examines how Bourdieu's theory may explain competitive behavior in fields of interest to marketers.

Methodology

61 in depth interviews were completed with respondents that were representative of each of 61 geodemographic 'types' – clusters that enable marketers to segment an entire population.

Findings

The findings suggest that examining human behavior through the lens of field and capital theory highlights the importance of the competition motive in explaining consumer's behaviour. New 'fields' were identified which seem to have assumed primary importance, particularly in middle class people's lives.

Research and Practical Implications

Viewing consumer behaviour as social competition implies that new segmentation approaches may yield successful marketing outcomes, and opens consumer psychology and behaviour itself to new interpretations.

Originality/Value

Very few research papers that apply field-capital theory to marketing are present in the literature. It is hoped this work addresses an important area, and one that is particularly prevalent in 21st Century consumerism.

Key Words

Bourdieu; field-capital theory; marketing; competitive society

Classification

Research Paper

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this work is to extend the work of Holt (1998) and further explore how Bourdieu's field (socially defined arenas of competition) and capital (assets people gather) theories of social competition may be deployed in consumer behaviour and segmentation approaches. Our pre-research hypothesis was that viewing some aspects of consumerism through Bourdeiu's theoretical lens would yield new insights into 21st century behaviour. Holt's 1998 work provided a US perspective – in this work we concentrate on a European centred work.

Fifty years ago people who wanted to 'stand out' used primarily economic means to do so, with only the upper middle classes in the habit of distinguishing themselves through their tastes. To demonstrate superiority over one's fellow man then was a matter of affording a holiday abroad, or an expensive car. Now, mass affluence has muddied the waters of these strict economic hierarchies. A series of trends in the USA (mirrored in the UK – the context for this study – see, for example, data in the British Household Panel Survey cited by The Future Foundation 2007) has revealed an explosion of life-choices; less people wanting to 'fit in' and more wanting to 'stand out'; a shift from a 'rules' bound deontological society towards a values oriented teleological society; and an expanded higher education. Together, these forces have driven a cultural plurality. This may manifest itself in mundane ways - people from ordinary backgrounds feel that they too can visit art galleries and eat in exotic restaurants without embarrassment. For others, the choice explosion may offer the chance to move beyond the trivia of which restaurant to eat, and towards self actualization through giving their lives significance. For us, in this work,

the interesting development has been the competitive component to lifestyle plurality. There is insecurity here: ‘have I chosen the ‘best’, most fulfilling lifestyle?’ ‘Are others having a better time?’

But while competition is by definition relational and linked to society, marketing academia has traditionally explained consumer behavior using primarily individualized constructs such as economic self interest. This then is our starting point: that social forces require a social theory to most powerfully explain them. By far the most important theory of social competition is that of Pierre Bourdieu: his work has led to a significant sociological literature. Our view is that his meta theory offers a powerful ‘theoretical lens’ through which to view consumers with respect to their competitive behavior within groups.

This paper offers to our knowledge the first study of its type in Europe. The key contribution is to provide a qualitative illustration of how Bourdieu’s Field-Capital theory can help explain consumer behaviour. The implication is that this theoretical approach adds rich insight to our understanding of why different segments behave as they do: the importance of concepts of capital acquisition, social competition, and life trade offs are all highlighted as having important consequences for marketing theory and practice.

The Importance of Bourdieu

During his lifetime Pierre Bourdieu created a series of theories which stand alongside Foucalt and Derrida as amongst the most influential of the 20th Century. His work has had a major impact across culturally driven areas including literary studies, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, gender studies and media studies. In his analysis of the cultural field of art, Bourdieu correlates

taste in ‘high art’ with upper classes, who do not have an economic interest in it, and acquire knowledge and understanding (cultural capital) in the subject apparently for its own sake, but partly to acquire social ‘position’. On the other hand working class people tend towards ‘popular’ tastes and interests, some of which may be linked to social or economic interest. In the time since Bourdieu’s early work in this area, the importance of hierarchies may well have diminished: the growth of a television/celebrity/popular culture in which poorly educated people may feel perfectly competent means that the prestige of so called ‘high culture’ may be increasingly irrelevant. Nevertheless Bourdieu’s work continues to have immense power in explaining behaviour in anything that moves beyond pop culture such as visiting museums. He argued that the design and structure of cultural institutions exclude people who do not have the cultural capital (knowledge of how to behave), and that they perform this exclusion while giving the appearance of being available to everyone (Webb et al 2002).

Bourdieu also pointed how cultures can be unifying. Cultural symbols (creative products of some kind) can actually construct society by contributing to a sub-group being publicly recognized. As Bourdieu put it – culture is unifying (Bourdieu 1984). So, members of a community organize themselves into social groups partly on the basis of taste or because a cultural product or form gives them a visible social identity (Webb et al 2002).

As well as art, Bourdieu’s enormous range of studies encompassed fields such as higher education, the world of TV, and journalism. In examining fields such as these, Bourdieu developed his theses. Bourdieu’s core thesis was that people acquire assets (economic, social and cultural capital) that are then deployed to compete in socially defined arenas (fields) of competition (Bourdieu 1984; Webb *et al*. 2002). . These concepts constitute what is arguably the most significant attempt to make sense of the relationship between objective social structures

(institutions, media discourses, governments, laws, etc) and everyday individual practices (what people do and why they do it). So - in, say, journalism, players need to have commitment to the principles of the field (the public's right to know, etc), and its capital (a good reputation, the respect of one's peers). However he acknowledged that in business fields, the demands of the market take centre stage. Outside of work, in arenas of activity such as hobbies, interests, activities, there are often consumption implications: for marketers, then, Bourdieu's work on fields, capital, and how cultural practices are used to express taste and status are of great importance.

Much of Bourdieu's work concentrated on 'career' based fields, but in this work we examine the extension of his theory more widely to everyday life (so, a field may be for example a group of friends competing on 'do-it-yourself' home improvement expertise). Hence, if a marketer gets to know a person's field of choice and understands the rules of behavior (such as how capital is deployed) in that field, they will have insight into that person's values and behavior.

Considering his enormous impact in other fields, the use of Bourdieu's theories by marketing academics has been surprisingly light. Much of Bourdieu's work is rooted in sociology and in explanations of behaviour designed to re-enforce class based tastes and status. As Williams (2002) has pointed out, whether by political correctness, postmodern sensibilities or just lack of interest, the influence of social class on consumer choices has been painfully neglected in the marketing literature. This is odd given that Coleman (1983) was just the latest in a line of work back to Martineau (1958) demonstrating the power of social class in segmenting markets. Bourdieu's own work, being sociological in nature, did highlight and prioritise the inequalities inherent in social classes, but his work also makes it abundantly clear that irrespective of social

debates, the social classes have starkly different attitudes and behaviours, underpinned by the observation that they appear to value different things. This has been reflected in work by Mommas and Schor (1998) and Wallendorf (1998) that investigated decision processes and consumption variations across social classes. Consumer behaviour writers generally acknowledge that evaluative criteria vary across the social classes, but little work has been done that look at these observations from different theoretical standpoints.

Holbrook et al (2002) researched participation in cultural activities and offered some evidence for their umbrella framework in which sometimes there is homogeneity in that 'some things are liked or disliked by everybody'; there is also an omnivore effect in that 'some people like just about everything'; finally, there is distinction a la Bourdieu's work: upmarket consumers use activities as a way of communicating their superior taste. One could conclude from Holbrook et al's work that a 'field' such as home improvement could be used by some as an arbiter of taste and hence a competitive arena, but could be a homogeneity field (liked by everybody) and if so perhaps less likely to be a competitive arena. Meanwhile omnivores who 'like just about everything' may be competitive across many different fields, or may just enjoy variety. An important precursor to this work is that of Holt (1998), whose work extended Bourdieu's ideas into consumerism by applying the concept of cultural capital to explain various consumption practices. Arnould and Thompson's (2005) review of consumer culture theory highlighted how social structures such as social class influence consumption, suggesting that class socializes people into valuing types of capital, and that this in turn influences consumer choice. Outside of academia influential writers such as Brooks (2000) and Willmott and Nelson (2003) have had an impact on cultural and business thinking, and it is surprising that their work has not led to more academic research.

But, the work of Holt, Holbrook et al, and Arnould and Thompson notwithstanding, there remains plenty to do to understand how Bourdieu's theories influence consumption. The following questions require exploration. What fields do consumers compete within, and how are these fields defined? What capital types do they prioritize, and how are the 'rules of the game' organized and communicated? Finally, is there scope to potentially segment consumers according to field-capital dimensions? The academic marketing literature has tended to place a high priority on psychology based theories in explaining consumption. In exploring these questions, the contribution of this work will be to address the current lack of sociological explanations of consumption, providing an interpretation on consumption behaviour that takes into account recent cultural changes in society.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study was devised in which in depth interviews were undertaken to explore how field-capital theories explained peoples' lives. Our objectives were to investigate the extent to which people regarded their cultural, social and economic capital as assets that they could deploy competitively in 'fields'. We also explored the extent to which such competitiveness is self aware, and whether the acquisition of capital became a conscious attempt to improve social position within a field. Finally, given the explosion of interests and activities in modern life, we suspected there would be a high degree of complexity residing in how fields of competition were defined. Bourdieu had confined his studies to competitive arenas within career paths. This research afforded an opportunity to explore how people defined their own fields in non-work activities, including consumption.

A typical interview interweaved different lines of enquiry. Listening to descriptions of people's lives prefaced the use of third person projective techniques to expose the idea of social competition to people without appearing to directly probe on possible socially defensive areas. A typical projective technique deployed would begin with the question 'Please think about a close friend of yours, someone of similar age and with similar interests. What kind of things do they value? how do they like to be seen by others? Are they competitive in some areas of their life?' And so on. Interviews were generally of 1-2 hours duration, and were taped. An incentive of £25 was offered to compensate for time, and respondents were interviewed in their own homes. This afforded an opportunity to note any items of consumption that were on 'display' within the home, and in some instances these became quite important topics of debate. Post interview analysis was conducted by careful re-examination of the tapes. A basic coding exercise using qualitative analysis software allowed us to quickly organize the data into major themes – the extent of competitive behaviour, how behaviours are manifested, field types and descriptions, capital types and possible dimensions of capital. However, in the main, the data was analysed through interpretation by the authors, making use of Bourdieu's theories.

A full spread of respondents across society explored any differences in cultures across different demographic groups. Geodemographic segmentation descriptors were used as the sampling frame for recruiting. Based on the UK census data and other data sources (see below), this segmentation tool guarantees all key demographics will be represented – and adds a geography/neighbourhood dimension. While class based cultural differences were important to this study, basing the sample purely on social grade might have been too simplistic. We argue that for a study of this type the variable 'neighbourhood' has a value over and above gender/age/income and class

variables. The interaction of people within neighbourhoods is important to us, and provides a motive for a sampling frame that is robust enough to qualitatively explore the sociological effects of groups. One example of such a group may be academics themselves: Bourdieu identified that a 'cultural elite who are also economically non elite develop a set of tastes in opposition to materialism'. So, groups based on well educated but 'non materialist' groups are predicted to react differently to a well educated but career focused segment with respect to capital deployment and field choice. The geo-demographic split of the sampling frame enabled such differentials to be clearly delineated.

Geodemographic systems rely on principles outlined by Rothman (1989). In essence the theory has some resemblance to the old adage 'birds of a feather flock together'. Two key principles aply: first, two families living in the same neighbourhood are more likely to have similar characteristics than two chosen at random. Second, neighbourhoods can be characterized using the demographics of the households they contain, and that these descriptions repeat themselves in other, dispersed, neighbourhoods that have similar characteristics. The UK Census based commercial product Mosaic provided a sampling frame, and the authors conducted 61 in depth interviews with respondents professionally recruited (a research agency selected respondents from electoral roll lists that were Mosaic coded) from each of the 61 'Mosaic Types' (see the sampling frame below). These 'Types' were created from analysis of the UK Census data (public demographic information collected every decade). The census data is supplemented from sources such as the electoral roll, credit-referencing data, market research, mail-order trading data and County Court Judgments. The census itself consists of a questionnaire, sent to the entire UK population, asking for data on over 300 variables. Eighty-five per cent of the subsequent data is based on a 100 per cent sample of the population.

Experian's MOSAIC uses the following census data: age, employment type, housing tenure, marital status, travel to work, amenities, recent movers, unemployment, housing type, household composition, car ownership, socio-economic status, and household size. At present, 'income' is inferred using other variables as surrogates: house size, occupation types, and education.

There are two major analytical processes that need to be applied to the raw census data. First, the initial 4000 or so possible variables need to be *reduced* to the key independent variables that are seen as driving consumer behaviour. Second, the areas need to be *combined* into segments that the variables tell us will contain similar people.

Most operators use 'factor analysis' or 'principal components analysis' as a data reduction technique to reduce co-linearity. The data is reduced from the original 4000 or so variables to between 40 and 100 variables. To combine the records into segments that reflect the differences between areas, an exploratory, descriptive technique was needed. Cluster analysis was found by the industry to be ideal for the job of maximising the differences between segments, while minimising the differences between individuals within the same segment. Hence, residents of the same cluster exhibit similarity in their attitudes and consumption patterns, while those in different clusters display marked differences.
The geodemographic industry is a multi-million pound marketplace that is subject to robust inspection by industry buyers and competition between suppliers. Product standards are very high, and a great deal of effort is placed on robust techniques – driven mainly by commercial imperatives.

Each respondent was pre-screened to ensure their characteristics fitted those of the group they belonged to. So, for example 'Group E' was a segment of people who were young, highly educated (typically graduates), and would typically for this group have liberal attitudes. The recruiting agency therefore pre-checked demographic data with potential recruits – checking age,

education, household type and occupation details. Potential respondents were then presented with a photo-montage (professionally created by Mosaic owners Experian to describe their segments) and these pictures were used to facilitate a short discussion with the recruiters to check that, attitudinally, respondents fitted into each segment. If a fit was not obtained the recruiters moved onto other potential respondents until a fit was found. The result was a sample containing individuals that reflected a complete spread across a typical western European society.

The Sampling Frame

Each Type below is a subset of larger Groups, denoted by the prefix letters A through to K. These Groups are described in Appendix 1.

A01 Global Connections	E32 Dinky Developments
A02 Cultural Leadership	E33 Town Gown Transition
A03 Corporate Chieftans	E34 University Challenge
A04 Golden Empty Nesters	F35 Bedsit Beneficiaries
A05 Provincial Privilege	F36 Metro Multiculture
A06 High Technologists	F37 Upper Floor Families
A07 Semi-Rural Seclusion	F38 Tower Block Living
B08 Just Moving In	F39 Dignified Dependency
B09 Fledgling Nurseries	F40 Sharing a Staircase
B10 Upscale New Owners	G41 Families on Benefits
B11 Families Making Good	G42 Low Horizons

B12 Middle Rung Families

B13 Burdened Optimists

B14 In Military Quarters

C15 Close to Retirement

C16 Conservative Values

C17 Small Time Business

C18 Sprawling Subtopia

C19 Original Suburbs

C20 Asian Enterprise

D21 Respectable Rows

D22 Affluent Blue Collar

D23 Industrial Grit

D24 Coronation Street

D25 Town Centre Refuge

D26 South Asian Industry

D27 Settled Minorities

E28 Counter Cultural Mix

E29 City Adventurers

E30 New Urban Colonists

E31 Caring Professionals

G43 Ex-Industrial Legacy

H44 Rustbelt Resilience

H45 Older Right To Buy

H46 White Van Culture

H47 New Town Materialism

I48 Old People In Flats

I49 Low Income Elderly

I50 Cared For Pensioners

J51 Sepia Memories

J52 Childfree Serenity

J53 High Spending Elders

J54 Bungalow Retirement

J55 Small Town Seniors

J56 Tourist Attendants

K57 Summer Playgrounds

K58 Greenbelt Guardians

K59 Parochial Villagers

K60 Pastoral Symphony

K61 Upland Hill Farmers

In the remainder of the paper each respondent is coded according to their Mosaic Type. Hence early in the next section we refer to, for example, ‘respondent D21’ – as can be seen in the table

this refers to the respondent from Type ‘Respectable Rows’, part of a larger group known as ‘Ties of Community’.

RESULTS

In this section we present the most important findings of our exploratory research. Findings are illustrated through quotes, with interpretations, using Bourdieu’s principles, attached to each section as appropriate. There are three main sections. We begin with a discussion of how social competition appears to have spread through different elements of society. We then report on ‘fields’ (social arenas of competition) identified in the research, before finally exploring how capital acquisition (assets to be deployed in fields) is managed by our respondents.

The application of field-capital theory to consumerism: the importance of competition

Seeing the world through the lens of field-capital theory raises our consciousness of the way people compete and compare themselves with others. For our respondents, many of life’s everyday activities were an opportunity to adopt a position relative to others. This is an unremarkable observation but sets the foundation for this work. Here, D21 was talking about his home improvements:

“Would you be keen for somebody to sort of notice that wall socket on the quiet?”

“I’d probably … on the quiet I would …I wouldn’t want to say ‘oh come and look at this socket here’ … but I ***want*** *… people to … think ‘Oh it’s a nice house’.”*

D21 Respectable Rows

For D21 ‘home improvement’ was a ‘field’ (not articulated by him as such of course) in which knowledge and expertise of trivial items like sockets and dimmer switches were informally a source of competition between friends and relations. The wall socket was a visual demonstration of expertise that helped communicate a position of status to others in this ‘field’.

Exploring levels of Competitiveness

There was considerable variation in the extent to which respondents competed in social arenas. Figure 1 summarizes our findings. Figure 1 is a qualitative representation of our interpretations of the interviews, allowing the reader a rapid overview of this section of the analysis.

Take in Figure 1

To some extent figure 1 reflects a pattern that Holt’s (1998) US study explored: well educated and high income people with middle class backgrounds were in general much more competitive across most fields than lower income or working class people. The circle in the top right of figure 1 indicates people with a higher sensitivity to social position within friendship groups, with family, or with local society. For instance we have A05, a high achieving mid-aged man who sang in his local operatic society:

“[Competitiveness] manifests itself in a couple of ways. It manifests in who is singing loudest at certain points, or who has got better breath control. But the way it manifests itself mostly is who has superior musical knowledge...”

A05 Provincial Privilege

The most competitive social arenas uncovered in this study were located within ethnic minorities or specific religious groups. Prominent examples were J51, a woman of Jewish origin, and C20, a British-Asian respondent, whose religious and cultural societies exerted influences and pressures to compete that were very strong, often stronger than the wider, seemingly more benign general British culture.

"I know my parents sometimes go round people's house and someone will say 'Oh, my son's a doctor' and stuff like that and my parents just turn round and say 'My son's this and that' and they are always striving to get one over the other. You can never win, because someone has always done something bigger and better. To an extent, that has filtered down into the second and third generations, but not to the extent that it is in the oldest."

C20 Asian Enterprise

"Most of [my Jewish friends] have husbands who are professors or something or other, it is status and money that are extremely important…doctors and professors. Also, an academic professorship is not as valuable as a medical one. I don't know whether that's true in the general public, it's certainly true in our community. Generally it is the rule; the hierarchy in the synagogue are the people with a lot of money. I don't mean just well off, I mean millionaires."

J51 Sepia Memories

Well educated people of middle class background (often Group A, 'Symbols of Success' respondents) pressured each other socially to compete, with even those who were naturally reluctant 'competers' feeling social pressures to join in:

"What drives that? What's driving that wanting to avoid future disappointment?"

"I think it's this … quite a … it probably goes back to ***a slight*** *bit of competition with my friends … You know it's quite hard when you talk to friends and colleagues and they have strong ideas that in ten years' time they want to earn quadruple what they do now … and eventually if I sort of say well I'm quite happy doing what I'm doing, it just sounds a bit … a bit meek"*

A01 Global Connections

'Competers' and 'Comparers'

There were subtle but important differences between the highly competitive set we have just examined and the next group down in figure 1 - let's call them "comparers" - whose characteristics were to compete in a shallow, broad sense across a multitude of unspoken and barely acknowledged fields:

"Why are you moving?"

"Well several reasons …we feel we want a little bit more space which I suppose is coming back to being materialistic. … we feel we'd like a slightly larger garden. We've been very happy here. We just feel we want to upgrade a little bit."

A02 Cultural Leadership

This was all part of a vaguely competitive materialism between A02 and her peers.

Compared to the operatic society mentioned by A05 above these consumption based fields were more loosely defined to allow room for 'winning' without having to acknowledge the whole unseemly business. The use of 'unseemly' here is culturally specific to the UK. Competing for position and status is subject to varying levels of acceptability in different cultures. The United States has always prided itself on its robust, open society in which it is a source of pride that an individual can achieve through hard work. Britain, in contrast, prides itself on achievement being apparently 'effortless' and consequently competing openly is seen as rather tasteless. As a result not many of the 61 respondents described themselves as competitive, but as each interview unfolded it became clear many were.

'Comparers' dominated in arenas such as 'town society' (middle class social networking within which position was sought via the strength of one's linkages to powerful people), but in order to downplay overt competition an entire set of social rules and etiquettes were created. For one respondent, visits to UK National Trust properties (stately homes and the like) were displayed as apparently cultural in nature but the readiness to both quantify the number of visits, and demonstrate her appreciation of fine art revealed other motives.

This need to hide social competing resulted in somewhat artificial narratives being created about their lives, which in turn led to a yearning for authenticity. Authentic goods or experiences compensated for their difficulty in doing an activity for its own sake rather than as a means of creating an impression.

"Agas are the thing to have, aren't they, rather than…I mean this is a very old one, and it's just fantastic in the winter. But, I would say that taste in terms of what people do [here] would be, if

they were ever doing an extension, to use local stone... If they were replacing their windows, not to go for UPVC, but to go for wooden sash windows…and you probably wouldn't even notice that they'd replaced them."

A03 Corporate Chieftains

From 'Comparers' to 'life-balancers'

At the other extreme were people who were well educated and socially highly aware and deliberately set their stall out not to compete, but instead to exhibit a set of values that reflected their moral stance on life:

"*I self reflect a lot I would say and I think you know I listen to lots of opinions. I don't know I'd say I'm quite an open person. I'm quite a non-judgmental person. I'd like to hope anyway I am*"

E31 Caring Professionals

People like E31 seemed to maintain a strong self image as a liberal and caring person, and may be highly driven and ambitious but in what they regarded as an uncompetitive way. These people often had an advanced sense of the emotional importance to themselves of social capital and the spiritual importance of cultural capital. A few were remarkably clear headed about planning their lives in such a way (trading off economic, social and cultural capital) as to ensure they lived a 'balanced' life. A key driver to this was a high awareness of their own happiness and not to get caught in what they saw as the social pressures of 'keeping up with the Jones's'.

Traditional Mainstreamers

E31 would have been slightly contemptuous of D22. Settled within the lower middle classes, D22 was typical of more mainstream respondents who prioritized economic capital and, thanks to their accepting views of traditional norms, were likely to choose to compete in un-remarkable fields such as home improvement, gardening, or perhaps a bit of gentle competition with parenting issues or holiday destinations.

"We've got the last two big rooms to do which is the bathroom and the kitchen but our mortgage is paid this year so it should start to ease up or we'll take out another loan for the kitchen [laughs]. That's life isn't it?"

D22 Affluent Blue Collar

'Blue Collar Enterprise' respondents from group H had similar economic means to those in group D, but we found a totally different attitude to money, with H47 keen to make money but spending it immediately for one-self (represented in figure 1 as 'hedonistic'):

"It seems to be household things you've gotta buy ...I am getting a bit fussier in my old age ... better quality. I like nice quality things whereas before, say, I would go to a market to get a bath towel, or Primark but now it's like "oh no. No I can't. It's gotta be Lewis's. I bought some nice Chef's knives, Sabatier. I don't want the cheapy Rimmer blimmin' whatever things."

H47 New Town Materialism

People like H47 respond well to the marketing driven notion of status being derived from consumables, but in contrast their cultural capital was fundamentally about joining in rather than standing out. Taking vacations was about being with friends, not social one-upmanship:

"[Caravanning] is my sociable life. We just all get together on a night, have a sing song and a few beers and it's brilliant and the kids are happy 'cause they've got each other and there's nothing there, just a field."

H47 New Town Materialism

Deprived communities set low priority on competing

The most deprived groups in UK society are the Mosaic Groups 'Welfare Borderline' (F) and 'Municipal Dependency' (G). When asked, F and G respondents regarded the idea of *cultural* competition as self indulgent middle class behavior. Young males with quite difficult backgrounds (F40 and F37 from the 'Welfare Borderline' Group) acquired detailed knowledge of 'street life': knowledge of acceptable attitudes and behaviors within inner city estates. For some this knowledge would be used to compete for positions as group leaders, but for others such as F40 day to day survival took precedence over social positioning. Here he talks about local drug dealers:

"We're not living in the Bronx, but … [drugs are] there if you need it, sort of thing… You've got heroin addicts that live round here and stuff, they need that stuff. The pushers will supply them with it. …Two guys that I actually knew quite well, killed each other at the end of the estate there, shot each other to death."

F40 Sharing a Staircase

Slightly in contrast to Holt's (1998) findings, we found that working class respondents did deploy capital within fields to acquire status – but the conditions had to be right, and the 'rules' were strict. F40 told of how clothing was a considerable signifier of status – though he personally lacked sufficient economic capital to be a player. F38 told of a 'lads' golfing trip, in a minibus to Scotland, in which it became clear that the story telling, swapping of jokes, drinking games, late nights and so on had a competitive edge and pecking order ascribed to it. For those 'lads' who aspire to high position it was important to strike the right tone and have a good stock of stories ready – or face the ignominy of derision from the listening audience.

Others were more reactive still: G43 was a single parent on public support whose perilous economic situation meant life choices were made for her (illustrated in figure 1 as 'fatalistic'):

"As a single parent tarnished with same brush if you're not earning a lot of money, you … you've not got a lot of options of going out and doing things out."

G43 Industrial Legacy

But even G43 was lucky in life in the eyes of others. As researchers with a variety of backgrounds ourselves we are no strangers to different sides of life but we admit to being surprised by the number of respondents who had suffered significant trauma in their lives. F37 lacked any sort of platform in his life from which to concern himself with what he would regard as the luxury of social competition.

"*My mother was on her own. I didn't have a father. Well he left when I was six months and she was more … my mother's a strong figure so instead of discipline and she … she'd punch. She'd knock me out and … but she was … I love my mother to bits but I obviously I didn't agree with her … the way she brought up children but that's done and dusted now*."

F37 Upper Floor Families

Let us move now to the next section of the results: exploring new fields

A closer look at fields

Bourdieu defined fields as arenas in which people use their capital to compete for 'position'. Bourdieu himself noted the importance of this concept: 'if we want to understand human practices, we must first make sense of the fields in which they are played out'. Fields are at their core relational phenomena: people cannot deploy capital in a field without communicating with others in that field. This explains the importance of consumption objects (and practices as Holt (1998) found) as social signifiers.

While Bourdieu emphasized professional career pathways in his work, we suggest that marketers can extend the idea of fields to any relational 'space' of human activity that may have direct or indirect links to consumption. Obvious examples may be activity based fields such as golf, or direct consumption fields such as collectibles. However the field concept can be conceptualized much more broadly, as we found an extraordinary number and variety of 'fields' of competition. We alluded earlier to a contrast between well defined, explicit fields with well understood rules of engagement and strongly codified status positions, versus nebulous, loosely defined fields

whose rules were subtle and difficult to learn. A nebulous, but very important field was the relational space of middle class parents of young children. Being the 'best parent' was all about subtle signals that were exchanged. This contrasts with a sport based field such as golf or tennis in which the rules that dictate position and hierarchy are overt and easily understood. The point is that to understand parenting behavior the use of the game metaphor of 'competing in a field' allows us to understand individual or group actions more deeply.

Figures 2 and 3 give a flavor of how these fields deploy across social classes. We generated these fields from a macro interpretative analysis of the interviews. The diagrams are qualitative only.

Take in Figure 2

Take in Figure 3

Categorising fields: nebulous vs sharply defined

Holbrook *et al*.'s (2002) characterization of some activities being 'liked/disliked by everybody' while others may be arenas for differentiation, adds some structure to these fields. Some fields will be more suited as competitive arenas than others: competing on 'gossip' may be less intense than displays of wealth for example.

Indeed wealth based fields are a good place to start our discussion on fields. Brooks' work (2000) on 'Bourgeois Bohemians' highlighted the phenomenon of subtle displays of wealth. But we found displays of wealth (in the field 'who has the most money?') could still be ostentatious, particularly if you are relatively young. Here's E29, an inner city executive in his early 30s.

"Four very good friends I'm thinking of… I drive a BMW, the other guy drives a BMW, the other drives an Audi and the other drives an Audi so we all drive posh cars. Now I know my friends are friends with me because of who I am not what car I drive and not what flat I live in. But why is it that we still go back to this thing, this mindset that says 'right you know I've gotta keep up with my friends and have a BMW, buy an Audi or maybe look to upgrade further?'"

E29 City Adventurer

The more subtle and vague the field was, the harder it was for players to identify and follow the rules, but the irony was these fields (for example, '*look at all my unusual life experiences*', or '*my kids are doing lots of activities*') had a tendency to be very important in people's lives. In nebulous fields respondents were attracted by the subtlety of *indirect* competition, possibly because in these fields the performance matters less than an intimate but unspoken knowledge of etiquette. This may have appealed to the British mentality: scrabbling overtly for hierarchy was rather unseemly...!

The result is that when the rules of the 'game' are difficult to identify and interpret, middle class people compete not only through superior skills in the activity itself, but also *through process,* that is, through a superior understanding of these social rules.

For example, here's E33 demonstrating his advanced understanding of the 'rules' in getting on in life generally:

"Be well organized and help to organize others and be willing to put in the hard work of organizing. Do not express strong views that 'put people off'. Do not be seen to 'try too hard' to be everyone's friend. All in all have an advanced understanding of what it takes to 'be liked'."

E33 Town Gown Transition

In contrast to the social skills of E33, the less well educated C19 was competitive in a relatively well defined field: a cluster of technical activities such as motorcycle riding and maintenance and, strikingly, collecting and interpreting World War One memorabilia. C19 lacked the kind of interpersonal skills and education that would flourish in social fields but possessed good technical skills and was keen to show them off:

"A button stick, you cross your button like that and you apply Brasso and that stops the Brasso from getting on your uniform and once it's in position, you can polish your button. It's a bit of army kit. As a National Serviceman, I knew exactly what it was straightaway."

C19 *Original Suburbs*

C19 competed ostensibly as a collector in World War One memorabilia but throughout his interview made references to himself as 'an engineer' or 'a national serviceman' and he made these while showing off his knowledge of technical details of anything from motorbikes to Brasso buttons to rifle types. So his 'field' was in fact a rather male world of arcane and to an outsider trivial technical/engineering detail, competing on insider knowledge. C19 had a strong ego but lacked educational advantage and so had worked hard to obtain currency and position in well defined activities where the social playing field wasn't tilted against him.

Explaining behaviour using Habitus Theory

Behavioural differences in nebulous and sharply defined fields can be explained using Bourdieu's habitus theory. Habitus is a latin term referring to a habitual or typical condition. Bourdieu's theory describes a set of fluid pre-dispositions to behave in a certain way according to the individual's background, upbringing, influences, and experiences. However the habitus will bridge structures (cultural norms, peer pressures, 'normal' behaviours) with agency (free will to act as an individual). So, individuals with more developed sense of individualism may be attracted to more nebulous fields which allow more flexibility to compete; those who value social structures may be attracted to well defined fields.

The field of acting ethically

For those in Groups such as E (Urban Intelligence) who position themselves as challengers to accepted norms, newly created fields took prominence. One such was driven by a tendency to search for 'meaning' to their lives, which, led by university educated elites, and infused with recent concerns about the environment, has led to a rise in interest in 'acting ethically'. The high social profile afforded to acting ethically combined with the opportunities for one-upmanship makes this an ideal 'field'. Players in this field took a keen interest in advanced recycling methods, alternative energy sources for their houses and cars, the use of public transport and personal travel that has a light carbon footprint – walking and cycling. They were likely to be skeptical of those in the population at large who regard themselves as 'ethical shoppers', viewing this as self deception. But players in the 'ethical/environmental' field were themselves not immune to self deception: they rejected the very idea of competitiveness but at the same time exhibited competitive traits such as striving for improved recycling behaviors and comparing themselves with friends.

Rural communities prioritise local, social fields

These trendy fields contrasted with the highly traditional social arenas we encountered in rural settings. In contrast to some parts of rural Europe, rurally based people in the UK are quite often wealthy landowners or increasingly well educated middle classes who have fled urban life for a rural idyll. For us, this put wealthier British rural people somewhat at odds with the proposition (Holt 1998) that people with high cultural capital are national or international in their outlook: we found highly educated and wealthy people had placed their priorities on localized, village life:

"I've been on the Parish Council Committee for quite a few years now… We have all sorts of different functions going on. Lots of different charities people support but we have had cricket teams and, friends over the road, so we play tennis and it's a very sociable, friendly community really. Lots going on and we know pretty well everyone."

A04 Golden Empty Nester

Wealthy and successful rural people like A04 tended to focus on social capital – being part of things and joining in was important. There was awareness that the downside of mobility was the lack of local social capital – and so she was largely happy to settle for the lack of choice that their rural settings imposed, in return for high social bonding. (Indeed we caught a sense with some of our urban respondents that they had settled in areas that placed a high premium on a middle class version of street neighbourliness – a copy of the village intimacy their situation lacked).

A04's life may be interpreted as an example of how fields become important because they generate their own momentum from the investment put into them. For her, jockeying in the village 'field' and sticking to the rules may well be forces of habit or pre-set routines rather than

a set of choices driven purely by self interest. But this analysis ignores the sheer power of social capital that she had built up over decades in the village. Her position was in many ways enviable: her role as professional cook and also as a volunteer for 'everything, love' meant she was integrated into so much of village activity:

"It's got a very strong church which has a young following which is lovely and we've now got a lady vicar… I think even if you don't particularly want to follow the church it's very helpful in a village community to actually just join in part of it because you really get involved then."

A04 Golden Empty Nester

For A04 the feeling of being 'wanted' and valued was of great importance.

Traditional working class fields: 'live for today', 'everyday drama'

A04's life of jockeying for field position was in sharp contrast to the 'live for today' mentality of interviewees such as H47. H47's descriptions of camping emphasized how she enjoyed high position amongst her peer group in friendship fields that could be termed 'having the best time' or 'having a laugh'.

"I mean there's [caravan] meets every weekend. That's our little treat and we have a disco and just get really steamed up. It's brilliant. To be honest I'm the life and soul. We have a right laugh. It's brilliant."

H47 New Town Materialism

The concept of fields extended to deprived society but was limited: respondents in groups F and G often revealed a pecking order in (rather dysfunctional) 'local drama' fields: here the drama was that which the community created for themselves through arguing, fits of temper and all manner of fallings out and making up. Whoever kept in touch best with these dramas acquired a kind of status as well informed and entertaining:

"We had our own mini riot here once, yeah, two families - family down the bottom and a family who lived over that side and they just fell out over a dog. They both had a similar looking dog and one went missing and they both accused it of being back and he got all his mates and they had a little mini riot in the street. The police turned up and everybody disappeared [laughs]. Nobody said a word."

G41 Families on Benefits

Other variations for working class groups might be the 'celebrity gossip' field, within which players could jockey for status as someone who knew all the gossip and could communicate this enjoyably to others.

Our final section deals with how capital is acquired and used by respondents

How capital is used competitively

In order to compete in fields, people need capital: assets that they can deploy for better position. In *The Forms of Capital* (1986), Bourdieu distinguishes between three types of capital: *economic capital*: command over economic resources (cash, assets); *social capital*: resources based on

group membership, relationships, networks of influence and support; and finally *cultural capital*: forms of knowledge; skill; education, or any similar advantages a person has which give them a higher status in society, including high expectations. So, middle class parents may provide children with cultural capital by imparting the attitudes and knowledge that makes the educational system a comfortable, familiar place in which they can succeed.

Capital assets may be retained (future), deployed (present), or used (past). A consumer who spent money in a good restaurant last week used the past asset of money in order to gain knowledge about good food and cultural taste – a retained asset for future use; which they then deploy at a friend's dinner party at a specific point in time.

Holt (1998) identified two key outcomes of capital use: the basic utility of something for people with (as he put it) low cultural capital, and the aesthetic and cultural meaning of something for people of high cultural capital. In this work we have emphasized the importance of social competition as an important underlying motive for people. The competition motive directs people towards capital that is rarefied, subtle, and difficult to acquire. Let's illustrate these differences by imagining three people on a basket weaving course. For someone of modest means, knowledge of basket weaving could first be turned to economic capital to make money out of selling baskets – here the emphasis is make baskets cheaply and efficiently and sell at a profit. The second person who is well off but non-competitive may value the pure enjoyment or self expression with the weaving as a more personal activity and so the emphasis may be to spend much longer on one, highly intricate, basket. The third person who is socially competitive may position him or herself as superior in the 'alternative lifestyle' field. Here the emphasis may be making baskets implicitly for the peer approval of acquaintances, and the cultural capital *criteria* will change: time and

resources will be spent understanding rare, and valuable, ‘authentic’ historical designs that will impress.

Expert capital vs distinctive capital

In the course of our interviews we found that acquiring cultural capital to become an *expert* at something was downplayed significantly in favour of gathering the unusual or distinctive. Typical of this was respondent B13 (Burdened Optimists) who had worked in what she regarded as a slightly exotic destination, Norway, and used this experience to project a distinctive image. The resistance to the idea of ‘expertise’ may be a cultural oddity of the UK (Fox 2004) and may be at odds with descriptions of capital acquisition in other countries including the US. This cultural bias suggests UK citizens in search of status are more likely to attempt exotic challenges rather than become ‘expert’ at something. The trouble with the search for the exotic is that what is exotic today may be mundane tomorrow: ten years ago a tourism trip to Eastern Europe had cache and rarity value but is a fairly common destination nowadays.

The concept of ‘trading off’

We noted earlier the importance of social changes as a driver of this research – how has society changed in terms of what is valued? Thirty years ago acquiring economic assets had much higher priority than cultural assets, but increased affluence suggests shifting priorities. We hypothesized that these shifts would manifest themselves as a *trade off*, of less wealth for greater social and cultural capital. These compromises are by no means recent (a hundred years ago Freud pointed out that life is a trade off between freedom (travel, moving for work, etc.) and security (staying in one’s familiar neighborhood) but they have probably increased in intensity. In making his trade off decisions A01 was quite clear where he stood:

"…even if it led to disappointment I would still stay where I am, doing what I'm doing as long as it allows me to have my friends and my contacts and my sort of lifestyle really 'cause I'm still quite happy doing what I'm doing … I think my friends would probably say the same thing: they value their social life, their friendships, their relationships more than the fear of not quite achieving their ambitions."

A01 Global Connections

For him the freedom to 'try out' lifestyles in different places had the downside of lowered bonding social capital.

Sometimes trade offs of capital reached mammoth proportions with multilayered maneuvering between economic, social and cultural capital. This was especially true for culturally 'active' people who may be volunteers or involved in local society. One such, a rural councilor who was also a local raconteur and amateur dramatician, K58, was somewhat of a local celebrity for whom local social and cultural capital was all important. K58 illustrated Holbrook et al's typology of some people who were cultural omnivores ('some people like everything').

"…I'd always been interested in theatre and joined Allerton players. I produced three pantomimes, I produce plays and I produce plays for young farmers as well in competition … I go to parish council whether it's a committee or a full council, back to the pub and have a pint … I play skittles on a Monday night… for the last 30 years, I've been raising money for charity by doing after dinner speaking, I did one last night, but that all came out of the drama groups."

K58 Greenbelt Guardians

Such trade offs were of no concern for ‘Welfare Borderline’ or ‘Municipal Dependency’ Groups. For F37 capital was gathered for basic economic utility rather than symbolism, competition, or concerns with ‘trading off.’

“I’ve started getting into antiques, looking at antiques on eBay. Looking at all the antiques on eBay, what price they’re going for and how much they’re worth and what marks to look for and stuff like that… I’ve been looking at animals, like the calves and cows on there they’re going for a £170 and I know that at good sales and stuff you can pick them up for 30 to 50.”

F37 Upper Floor Families

DISCUSSION

Social commentaries have emphasized the increased average wealth and explosion of choices for many people today. This culture of ‘pick and choose from lifestyles’ has created the multiplicity of field-capital arenas explored in this study. Looking at consumers’ lives through the lens of field-capital theory suggests that appealing to pure materialism is too simplistic. Using material exclusivity to communicate status is a less convincing customer proposition than hitherto. The decline in power of status symbols such as the Amex Gold Card, the downward price pressure on many formerly exclusive pursuits in particular exotic travel, the rise of eating out for the masses, and so on, all attest to this trend.

So, in future, how will successful people communicate their position as winners in a flattened consumer society? One answer might be the growth of success symbols in ‘achievement’ based

fields – symbols such as certificates, medals or other artifacts. But, in the UK at any rate, the cultural lack of support for such symbols (which apart from within military or sporting arenas are regarded as unseemly boasting) suggests demand will grow for products or services that meet the need for under-stated, apparently accidental achievement, modestly acknowledged. In the last few years we have seen the growth of brands that acknowledge the importance of 'understated cleverness' and appealing to those who 'get it' and are hence insiders. Such are the subtle ways that branding needs to move in order to signify the brand user as modest or authentic. Honda is one such brand with its advertising based strongly on corporate philosophies of wisdom and innovation, in preference to product features.

What is not so obvious is the business of communicating status from much more subtle fields such as 'having unusual experiences'. We noticed a rise in non-standard ways of communicating status – for example Group E ('Urban Intelligence') were prominent in their use of social 'storytelling' to compensate their lack of materialistic symbols of high position.

The desire to reach positions of status remains, and has major implications for commerce and society. Successful competitors will be more likely to outsource domestic services that then free up time for them to achieve. Those who value trading off social and economic capital to hit the right balance for themselves will need products that help manage that elusive balance that they seek; so time savers, ways of communicating efficiently, short break cultural opportunities and the like, will be attractive for these people.

One of our pre-research hypotheses was that some sectors of society will be rejecting economic capital in favor of cultural capital as they seek to 'make a difference' or self actualize. Are people

getting tired of empty materialism and eschewing it in favor of changing the World? Well, they may be, and some of our respondents hinted wistfully at these ideals, while we gently pointed to the expensive stuff they were surrounded by:

"This watchstrap, not even the watch, cost me £200. It's a watchstrap. Why spend £200 on a watchstrap? That money should really go to the Tsunami relief. There's plenty things that money could go to than a watchstrap."

E29 City Adventurer

So, we do need to be careful about predictions that society is moving to post consumerism, but nevertheless we predict commercial providers will need to increasingly tune into subtle, often non-consumerist fields of competition. The middle class elite fields of social competition seem to be shifting towards education, green issues, town politics, sports organization, or exotic (non commercialized) travel.

Marketing has always thrived on meeting unacknowledged needs, on satisfying wants that relate to people's less attractive motives – greed, for example – as well socially desirable ones. The need for people to compete and compare by deploying capital in fields is not socially attractive but a major, even dominant theme of some lives. Commerce, the public sector, and non profits may all be able to better position and target opportunities for people to better compete, whether it is lifestyle lessons, organizing social gatherings, self help, the right clothing, and so on.

CONCLUSIONS

This work has sought to build on the idea of applying Bourdieu's capital-field theories to consumerism, concentrating in particular on the importance of social competition. In doing so it has, it is hoped, made a further contribution to the important work of Holt (1998). As Arnould and Thompson's review (2005) demonstrates, there is relatively little research in this arena and it is hoped this work demonstrates an important explanatory framework for some aspects of consumer behaviour.

Bourdieu's theories provide us with a fascinating lens through which to view modern society. We should not get carried away with thinking that everyone who acquires capital is doing so with the motive of competing for social position. However, descriptions of fields and capital deployed in those fields do add richness to our understanding of human motives, reminding us that as economic self interests are increasingly satisfied, people behave more and more in a social context. Schluter and Lee (2003) assert that 'all real life is a relationship'. If so, part of relating is competing, and ingrained within competition is position and status. In addressing the competitive society marketers should take care to filter their brands through local cultural conditions. Advertisers need to covertly signal how their brands help people compete. We would also expect that research on field-capital theory will help public policy marketing, given the importance of competitive behavior on private schooling, housing, environmental issues and so on. Bourdieu may not have had much time personally for what he may have dubbed the grubby business of marketing, but at heart he was a pragmatist, and wanted to change the world. He would have enjoyed the irony of marketing helping to make that change happen.

Appendix 1: Descriptions of Mosaic Groups

Group A ‘Symbols of Success’

Very successful and wealthy people with rewarding careers who live in sought after locations. Likely to have considerable economic, social and cultural capital assets.

Group B ‘Happy Families’

Younger than Group A, with young families, living in newly built homes and with steady jobs. Paying off quite large mortgages, their focus is often on home and contents.

Group C ‘Suburban Comfort’

Mature residents of comfortable homes whose children may have left home and their lives are getting easier. Often have very traditional, conservative views, unlikely to be risk takers.

Group D: Ties of Community

Live in industrial towns or inner city neighborhoods, these people often live in terraced houses and have had to adapt to the post-manufacturing era. With working or lower middle class roots, bonding social capital is high, but levels of education more modest.

Group E: Urban Intelligence

Young, well educated people living in flats in trendy areas of towns and cities, often close to universities. These people are adventurous and open to new ideas, and may challenge traditional norms and seek new experiences. Cultural capital may be high on the agenda.

Group F: Welfare Borderline

Poor and socially deprived, these people may occupy public or social housing, possibly tower blocks in inner cities. Their assets will be modest and economics are likely to dominate.

Group G: Municipal Dependency

Families on lower incomes who live on large municipal public owned council estates to be found on the edge of towns and cities, often rather cut off from the centers. Low incomes are matched by low aspirations, and economics is predicted to be a dominant force.

Group H: Blue Collar Enterprise

Education levels are relatively low but for these people, aspirations are high. These aspirations may be dominated by making and spending money, and having a good time, living for the moment. Social and peer pressures may set consumerist expectations of life, and higher forms of cultural capital may not be valued.

Group I: Twilight Subsistence

Elderly people mostly reliant on state benefits, possibly living in shared accommodation or flats. Very low expectations, and with modest needs: local social capital may be the dominant theme.

Group J: Grey Perspectives

Retired people who own their own homes and have independent income, often a good pension from former work. They are more likely to live by the coast in the UK, and will have active cultural lives, sometimes with considerable expendable income.

Group K: Rural Isolation

Dwellers of small communities in distinctively rural settings often cut off from large urban centers and amenities. Commitment to the local community is likely to be high, with locally based social and cultural capital high on the agendas.

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Figure 1: Levels of competition amongst different respondent groups

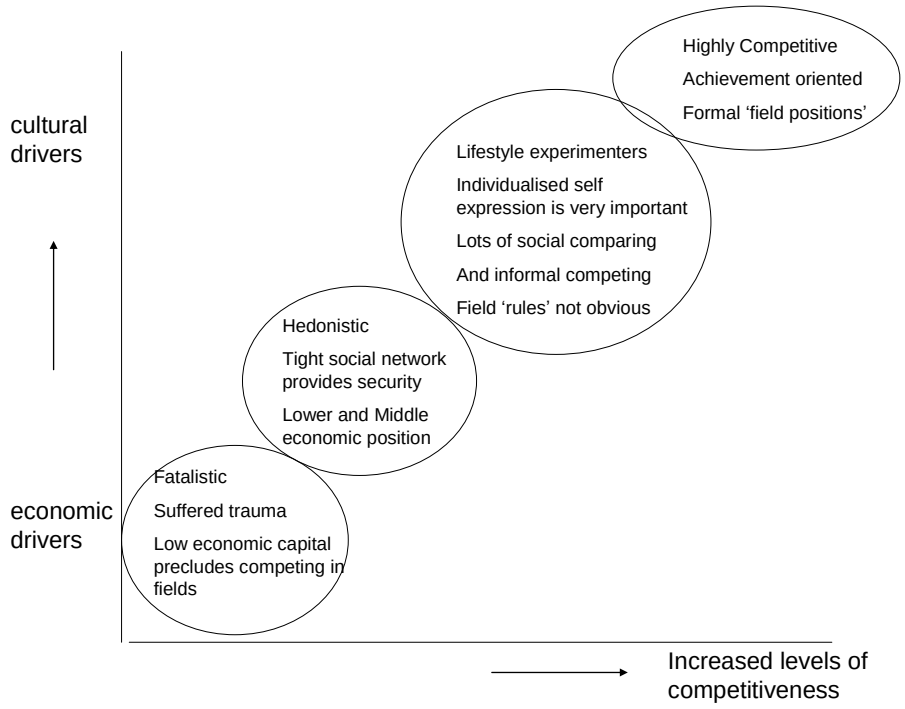

Figure 2: Tightly and loosely defined fields split across middle and working class groups

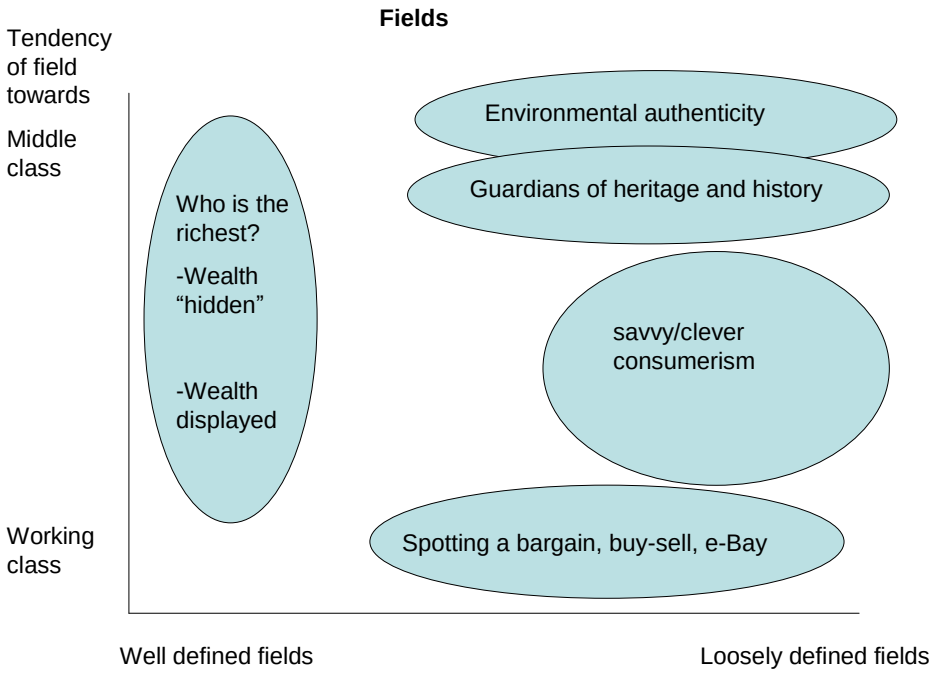

Figure 3: Tightly and loosely defined fields split across middle and working class groups