On Disgrace: Scandal, Discredit and Denunciation within and across Fields

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Abstract
This paper engages with the theme of disgrace from a Bourdieusian point of view. Starting out from a specific definition of ‘grace’ in terms of misrecognition, it goes on to consider some of the ways in which disgrace can be generated and some of the ways it can be handled by the disgraced party. While there are certainly many intra-field modalities of the genesis of disgrace, including violation of the rules of the game, the paper also emphasizes that disgrace can be generated by cross-field events, necessitating a switch of perspective from individuals in one field to individuals in multiple fields. This is also true of strategies for coping with disgrace.

Keywords
affect, Bourdieu, field theory, recognition, symbolic capital

I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial. (Cassio in Othello, Act II. scene iii)

On 25 May 2018, Harvey Weinstein, one of the most successful producers in cinema history, a multi-award-winning mogul of major influence in the movie industry, was led from a New York police station in handcuffs, having already been expelled from the Academy of Motion Pictures and Arts, removed from his production company and assured he would never work in Hollywood again. In 2011, Diederik Stapel, rising star of Dutch psychology, decorated with awards and precocious dean of faculty, was suspended from his position, investigated and charged with fabricating his published research data, admitting to fraud and agreeing to undertake community service. In a similar part of the world, but over

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a hundred years earlier, Vincent van Gogh was fired from his position at the powerhouse art dealership, Goupil & Co., he had entered a few years earlier as not only a promising apprentice but assumed protégé to his widely esteemed uncle. These stories, and the thousands like them that have attracted greater or lesser attention and notoriety down the ages, have one thing in common: a shocking fall from grace; an abrupt tumble from a revered position, whether long-held by the incumbent or a presumed waystation on a stellar ascent. They personify a sudden loss of power and prestige, and of the ability to accumulate further power and prestige, distinct from the recurrent ‘changing of the guard’ in many social spheres as newcomers question and critique established figures in the twilight of their careers.

My aim in this paper is to unpick the social genesis and navigation of such falls from grace. To do so I will draw on the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, the value of which lies in its capacity to offer correctives to prevailing conceptualizations and analyses. Most of the latter fix on the construction or mediation of ‘scandals’, typically construing the latter as ritualistic reinforcements of norms – sometimes conflicting norms – in a social order or bound up with (de)legitimation struggles in politics (e.g. Hepworth, 1975; Alexander, 1989; Thompson, 2000; Gamson, 2001; Adut, 2005; Neckel, 2005; Jacobsson and Löfmarck, 2008). Yet falling from grace is more pervasive than the emphasis on public scandal suggests, immiserating countless individuals even where there is little or no media intervention. *Why* people transgress or otherwise fall short in the first place and how they handle it, moreover, are generally overlooked, despite both occurring in systematic mays. Bourdieu offers tools for thinking these questions through, and, while accommodating the notion that people are oriented toward shared rules, goes beyond both functionalist/Durkheimian accounts of scandal (Alexander, 1989; Jacobsson and Löfmarck, 2008) and analyses focusing on interactional or situational elements of disgrace – status degradation ceremonies (Garfinkel, 1956), negotiating stigma (Goffman, 1963) or denunciation (Boltanski, 2011, 2013; Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999) – by emphasizing the *desires* and power-laden *structural* forces at work.

Yet the argument will be that a full grasp of the factors feeding into disgrace requires looking at things a little differently from Bourdieu’s usual regard and making some conceptual adjustments. This is not so much a case of emphasizing technological change since Bourdieu was writing, though the internet, smart technology and social media undoubtedly mean that scandals and disgrace are discovered, mediated and consequent in different ways, at different speeds and to different extents today compared to the past (see Atkinson, 2019). Instead the point will be that while there are plenty of instances where a fall from grace is seemingly the product of dynamics and struggles within a single *field*, to use Bourdieu’s key term, there are also many where the font of
disgrace is generated outside the field, in another field, and indeed when one scratches the surface it becomes obvious that even in the most seemingly cut-and-dried intra-field case extra-field processes are implicated in some way and, for a fuller account, should be considered. Often an intra-field perspective is efficient, but not always, and it is rarely comprehensive. The same is true, I shall add, of some of the major ways in which people try to cope with their disgrace. In short, fields bleed into one another, and in ways that go far beyond Bourdieu’s usual invocation of relative autonomy and heteronomy as features of fields. When a field as a whole is in the frame, this bleeding may not be so obvious, but when one centres the analytical gaze on specific events, practices and people the multiplicity of effective forces comes to the fore.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, it begins by considering what it is that people fall from – that is to say, what ‘grace’ is in Bourdieu’s sociology, which involves a short tour through the main concepts and brief consideration of some useful extensions and critiques. It then goes on to consider disgrace as generated largely by intra-field dynamics, including unfavourable exchange and violation of the field’s logic – its ‘nomos’, its ‘doxa’, its rules. After that I consider instances where an agent’s disgrace in one field is more clearly tied to their practice within another field, whether mundane or infamous, with the interplay of work, family and sex being particularly prominent. This leads to a final section acknowledging the importance of this interplay for how people deal with their social fall too.

‘Grace’ in Bourdieuxian Sociology

Grace, from Latin gratus (agreeable, thankful), may refer to movement or manner deemed pleasing – a judgement inextricable from class domination, according to Bourdieu (1984). When contrasted with disgrace, however, the word’s meaning is broader: having ‘God’s favour’, that is to say, enjoying good fortune or success, as conventionally defined, on the grounds of one’s worthiness. To be in a position of ‘grace’ is, therefore, to be recognized by others as worthy. More accurately, it is to be misrecognized by others since the properties securing that recognition are, in fact, arbitrary and mask the domination on which it is based. This is the foundation of Bourdieu’s sociology, built as it is on the Pascalian vision of human beings escaping finitude and contingency through diversion and justification. Bourdieu’s (1990a, 2000a) addition was that both diversion and justification are provided by the social ‘games’ we play with others – excitement and purpose come through efforts to be seen as valuable in the eyes of others in relation to specific stakes. The trouble is, to be seen as valuable inherently breeds struggles to be seen as more valuable than others, and efforts to impose certain perfectly arbitrary stakes and properties as unquestionably valuable, spawning relational
hierarchies and struggles founded on little more than human striving. Those properties Bourdieu called capital, and the more capital one has, the more one can use it to acquire further capital or block and denigrate others.

The ‘games’ we play with others snare our libido, generating what Bourdieu termed *illusio* – unquestioned belief in the desirability of the stakes of the game – and inform our ego-ideals, but also come to be characterized by a *doxa* – a set of unquestioned assumptions about how the game works – as well as, on top of that, warring orthodoxies and heterodoxies. Bourdieu also posited that our position in the game – our possession of capital relative to others – generates a certain set of objectively possible moves, differentiated by degree, which we intuit via a *practical sense* of what is possible and probable within the field and what, therefore, is likely to befall certain actions. At root, this is what Bourdieu’s famous term *habitus* refers to: a feel for the game, of what others are likely to do, of what is likely to succeed and fail in the quest to accumulate capital, and the dispositions built up over time in adaption to the game.

Pre-industrial misrecognition struggles, like those Bourdieu documented amongst the Berbers of Kabylia in the mid-20th century, were small scale and required constant interpersonal exchanges – gift-giving or challenges – to maintain the distribution of symbolic capital, understood in terms of ‘honour’ (Bourdieu, 1990b). In large-scale industrial social orders like those that dominate the world today, however, the misrecognition struggle has become differentiated into a multitude of relatively autonomous fields. Each field has its own specific form(s) of capital defining who is esteemed and who is not, or dominant and dominated, though in capitalist societies the power of money, or economic capital, often provides a heteronomous source of worth and power within a field too. Each also has its own attendant illusio and doxa, the latter of which can congeal into what Bourdieu described as a *nomos*, or fundamental rule or law governing the operation of the field. Some fields may be institutionally bounded, requiring specific symbolic tickets for entry (e.g. credentials), but others are not; and some may be highly institutionalized, with capitals, strategies and positions being mediated by specific systems (e.g. the education system), while others continue to be less so or not at all, that is, more dependent on interpersonal exchanges and perceptions of worth. Bourdieu himself identified the ‘social space’ – the field of classes, defined in contemporary societies by possession of economic capital, social capital (connections) and cultural capital (mastery of symbolic systems) – as well as fields of cultural production (art, literature, music), intellectual production (science, social science, religion), ‘ideological’ production (law, politics) and economic production (see e.g. Bourdieu, 1984, 1991, 1993, 1996a, 2004, 2005).
The various fields of production are contained within a ‘meta-field’, the field of power, in which the agents across the different fields contend against one another to impose their principle of misrecognition, and the definitions and categorizations of the world that go with it, as universal (see Bourdieu, 1996b; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1993). Contrary to notions that the concept of field thus applies only to elites (Lahire, 1998), in later years Bourdieu also expanded the concept to cover specific organizations and enterprises (Bourdieu, 2005) as well as, importantly, familial and domestic relations (Bourdieu, 1998, 2000a; see also McNay, 1999; Atkinson, 2016). Others have added countless more fields to the list, some questionably so, and amongst the more provocative yet potentially illuminating stands the notion of a ‘sexual field’: a field defined by the desire to be ‘attractive’, gauged in all manner of ways (including sexual conquest), in which specific valued corporeal attributes act as a capital, but which is only weakly autonomous, invaded as it is by all sorts of alternative ‘attractive’ forces – money, power, fame, etc. – not related to physicality or sensuality (Green, 2013; Atkinson, 2020).

BROADSCALE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENTS – SUCH AS GREATER ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT FOR WOMEN – CASCADE THROUGH ALL FIELDS IN A SOCIAL ORDER, OFTEN HAVING SIMILAR OR ‘HOMOLOGOUS’ EFFECTS ON FIELD STRUCTURES. MOREOVER, FIELDS ARE INHERENTLY TEMPORAL: THERE IS A CONTINUOUS SUCCESSION OF THE GENERATIONS, WITH NEWCOMERS TO THE FIELD, OFTEN IN SUBORDINATE POSITIONS, PURSING SUBVERSIVE STRATEGIES AND CHAMPIONING HETERODOX VIEWS AS THE ONLY WAY TO TOPPLE THE ESTABLISHED FIGURES, WHO PURSUE DEFENSIVE, CONSERVATIVE STRATEGIES TO UPHOLD THE ORTHODOXY. SOMETIMES THE SUCCESSION IS REVOLUTIONARY, BUT AT OTHER TIMES IT MAY FOLLOW A STEADIER RISE/DECLINE DYNAMIC. DENUNCIATION AND DENIGRATION OF OTHERS AS A ‘DISGRACE’ ARE PART AND PARCEL OF THIS STRUGGLE, OF COURSE, AND A RICH VEIN OF BOURDIEU-INSPIRED WORK HAS DOCUMENTED THE SENSE OF SHAME, GUILT AND FAILURE THAT SURROUNDS THOSE DOMINATED, OR FROM DOMINATED ORIGINS, IN THE SOCIAL SPACE (SEE SAYER, 2005). SEPARABLE FROM THIS, HOWEVER, ARE THE SUDDEN FALLS FROM GRACE OF SPECIFIC INDIVIDUALS. TRUE ENOUGH, AT TIMES THESE MAY ENTWINCE WITH THE MOVEMENT OF THE SOCIAL GENERATIONS IN SOME WAY, BUT AT OTHERS THEY ARE COUNTER TO THE TENDENCY, LIKE A SHOOTING STAR DARTING CONTRARIWISE TO THE NOCTURNAL MOTION OF THE HEAVENS, AS WHEN A NASCENT TRAJECTORY IS SWIFTLY HALTED, REVERSED AND PERHAPS, THROUGH FIELD-EXIT OF ONE FORM OR ANOTHER, SNUFFED OUT ALTOGETHER.

**The Genesis of Disgrace I: Intra-Field Dynamics**

There are at least two ways in which disgrace within a field can be heavily tied to the internal logic and struggles of the field in question. First of all, in some fields characterized by low levels of institutionalization, where symbolic capital is less secure and more labour-intensive, disgrace can befall an agent simply through one or more unfavourable exchanges. The
obvious example from Bourdieu’s (1990b: 98ff) own research is the dis-honour – sometimes redeemable, but sometimes lifelong – that was cast on individuals falling foul of the logic of exchange in Kabylia. Whether in relation to gifts, challenges or insults, a person could ‘cover themselves in shame’ or suffer ‘total humiliation’ (elbahadla) by either (i) engaging with someone of unequal standing, and thence being embarrassingly snubbed by a superior or censured for needlessly squashing an inferior; (ii) giving an inappropriate response or riposte – a meagre or gratuitous gift/insult, giving too little or ‘going too far’; (iii) or responding too soon or too late (or not at all). Honour may be redeemable in subsequent exchanges, but in some cases it could be so damaged as to mark the individual for the rest of their days.

These kinds of exchanges can, of course, occur in the fields of industrial/capitalist social orders too. To be sure, institutionalized forms of capital – qualifications, prizes, titles, money, etc. – tend to act as buffers against total disgrace and decline in many fields. In the social space, for example, there may be rare instances of rapid financial ruin and destitution, but for the most part (and possibly even in these cases) individuals are cushioned from falls after, for instance, job loss, by their holdings of social, economic and cultural capital (Atkinson, 2013). Even in capitalist social orders, however, there are some fields of low institutionalization where interpersonal exchange is highly consequential. Prime amongst these is surely the familial field, founded as it is on continuous practices and displays of care and affection. Inapt gift-giving may be the root, but it could also be discovery of an infidelity sending the implicated party’s stock plummeting, or a revelation that a favoured child has been lying to their parents about something valued within the field (educational performance, a relationship, etc.). Or it could be outright ‘rejection of inheritance’, as Bourdieu (1999) put it: a railing against parental orthodoxy on desirable futures, political outlooks and so on – a subversive strategy in the familial field, for sure, but one that can end in failure and disgrace.

There are also some larger-scale fields in capitalist social orders where, because of their specific logic, discrete, regulated interpersonal exchanges can have profound consequences for someone’s standing. This is perhaps nowhere more pronounced than in fields of sport, where physical capital in its varying species, all so friable and insecure, are prominent (on physical capital, see Shilling, 1993; Atkinson, 2016). Take boxing, for instance – a field alluded to, though never mapped, by Wacquant (2004) in his celebrated ethnography of a Chicago boxing gym. Economic, social and physical capital are all key in building and maintaining a fighter’s position in the field, but the ability to beat specific opponents, with their own portfolios of capital, is only ever a probability of greater or lesser favourability, and a shock defeat can have profound consequences for a fighter’s position. Some may use their resources to ‘bounce back’, but others are so shamed by the defeat that their aura of invincibility, and the
symbolic power it can deliver, is irretrievably damaged – and their libido so thwarted or weakened that they opt to retire, i.e. exit the field, sooner or later. Perhaps the most famous example in recent times actually comes from the parallel field of mixed martial arts – a field premised on very similar principles – in the form of Ronda Rousey. A former Olympic judoka turned competitor in the Ultimate Fighting Championship, her undefeated record against high-profile opponents fed into an image of indomitable that was abruptly shattered by her first surprise defeat and irretrievable after a second successive and decisive loss. She shunned the media – which she had previously embraced – contemplated suicide – her sense of self-worth being destroyed – and swiftly retired from the field altogether.

Disgrace can be generated in a second manner: following discovery of a violation of the rules of the game. Here is where Bourdieu can integrate yet go beyond norm-based accounts of scandal/disgrace, and again fields of sport, where the nomos of ‘fair play’ prevails, provide some obvious examples. ‘Cheaters’, including those using performance-enhancing drugs, can be swiftly subject to symbolic annihilation – condemned, stripped of titles, divested of lucrative sponsorship deals and removed from the record books. Two famous cases in recent years are Marion Jones, the American track-and-field athlete, and Lance Armstrong, the American cyclist. The same process has analogies across other fields, however. Fraudsters, bribers or insider-traders can violate the principle of ‘fair trading’ in the economic field, for instance, and find themselves incarcerated and stripped of their business roles, though this is perhaps more of a distortion of the money-making nomos of the field rather than an outright violation, and there has been evidence in the past that white-collar criminals from the business world tend to be remarkably capable of bouncing back (Benson, 1984; cf. Levi, 2002). Vote-riggers or vote-buyers might be considered analogues in democratic political fields since they defile the usual rules of the game of winning followers (cf. Thompson, 2000).

In the scientific field, where the nomos of the field is oriented around the use of logic and honest evidence to search for truth, and where symbolic capital takes the form of publications, prizes, institutional positions and such like, the major violation of the rules of the game, beyond the pernicious yet common instances of leveraging heteronomous forms of capital – connections, fame, economic resources – to increase the chances of one’s version of ‘truth’ being circulated, recognized and accepted (Bourdieu, 2004), is making up evidence (cf. Martin, 1992; Thérèse and Martin, 2010). Here we find Diederik Stapel and his ilk. Whatever the tensions between the scientific field and the journalistic field, a similar nomos – ‘free and honest’ reporting of ‘truth’ – provides the benchmarks for grace and disgrace within the latter too, at least the investigative section thereof. Hence the journalistic field is characterized not just by a battle with the forces of heteronomy, but by frequent instances of
individual journalists with ascendant trajectories being subject to symbolic destruction on discovery of violation of the field’s nomos, specifically, the profane act of fabricating evidence (quotes, interviews, informants) for stories or arguments. The cases of Stephen Glass, Jayson Blair and Sabrina Erdely all provide clear examples – younger reporters on the rise, perceived by most to be on a budding ascendant pathway through the field, who, on discovery of their fabrications, were subjected to degradation rituals marking the stripping of capitals: loss of employment, widespread vilification from field players, rescinding of prizes or awards, retraction of publications, etc.³

All these cases of discovered nomos violation have several preconditions in common. First, the violators clearly had a strong illusio – they desired the specific prizes of the game, i.e. the particular forms of recognition characterizing the field. However, that illusio did not encompass unbreakable faith in or commitment to the established rules of the game, only yearning for worth in the eyes of others. Second, the decision to stray from the nomos was surely based on their feel for the game – the perception of possibilities and likely futures given their current position and the state of the field. Perhaps, as a generalization and recasting of strain theory à la Merton (1938), they intuited that, within the legitimate logic of the game, as things stood, they could not garner recognition in the manner or at the speed they desired. Fuzzy or inaccurate as it may have been, there was a perceived gap between their fancied trajectory and their probable trajectory in the field, their ego-ideal and the reality principle, generating frustration, discontent and the belief that ‘cheating’ would remedy the situation.

As a strategy, however, it should be pointed out that nomos violation is not actually heterodox or subversive in the usual sense – part of an active and open pursuit and/or advocacy of a different system of evaluation in the field – but deceitful, aimed at appearing to succeed within the doxic rules of the game, whether orthodox or heterodox in outward appearance, while at the same time consciously breaking from them. It also depends on a practical sense, laden with all its possibilities for misjudgement, that the strategy will remain undetected. There may not have been discontent born of a mismatch of ideal and reality, however. Nomos violation may well have been the product of a serendipitous discovery – an honest mistake that went undetected – that generated the perception of the possibility of a trajectory other (and ‘better’) than that previously expected. A formerly unanticipated movement within the field entered the bounds of objective and subjective possibility; ‘getting away with’ the infraction transformed the feel for what is feasible and the range of thinkable futures. If attachment to the nomos is still strong – it is always a question of degree – the course of action may be accompanied by guilt, shame and anxiety.
Third, discovery of the violation is often unveiled in the course of investigation by others within the field, or the field of power more broadly, and is not exempt from the hierarchies, strategies and struggles therein. Discrediting a rival and being seen to uphold the rules of the game can work to strengthen one’s own standing, though the motivation may be sincere commitment to the nomos and distaste for ‘unfair play’ rather than cynical calculation. Or perhaps discrediting a person or group of people is an instrument of inter-field struggle – right-wing journalists seeking to undermine agents within the academic field as a means to curb criticism of the economic field, for example. Either way, the possibility opens up for instances where individuals can be disgraced within a field following accusation that they violated the nomos even where they did not, and even when they are exonerated after investigation. Depending in part on how the investigation is perceived by others (as biased, superficial, etc.), an individual’s name may stay ‘tainted’ and their trajectory may never recover – it becomes more difficult to find employment, collaborators, sponsors, team selection, etc., or the emotional trauma ‘takes the wind out of their sails’, the illusio weakens and they expend less time and energy on the old strategies and tactics for accumulating capital in the field (writing articles, training regimens, etc.).

Others in the field with which the denounced agent was connected – employers, supporters, sponsors, collaborators, team members and so on – can also be tainted by association, as if they are thereafter lumbered with a negative social capital, which may affect their own capacity to accumulate capital at the same rate or in the same manner as previously. Overt demonstrations of honesty and commitment to the rules of the game, and public denunciation of the disgraced – often in the register of feeling personally duped and betrayed – are tactics aimed at nullifying the potential effects of negative social capital.

The Genesis of Disgrace II: Inter-Field Dynamics

Unfavourable exchange and nomos violation are, then, major causes of swift capital loss and symbolic annihilation within a field. This is not all, however, for disgrace within one field can also be determined in whole or in part by the disgraced agent’s participation in a different field. It could be, for example, that an unfavourable exchange or a decision to deviate from the rules of the game is to some degree co-determined by position, trajectory and strategies within another field. A sporting loss may be attributable to insufficient training, but that may itself be the product of the agent dedicating more time and energy to strategies and practices in other fields, including the social space (e.g. excessive endorsements and media appearances in the quest to make money and pursue the lifestyle of the ‘rich and famous’) or the familial field (caring duties, dealing with relationship breakdown, etc.). Conversely, deceit or failure in the familial
field (‘letting someone down’) might be the product of devoting more time and attention to the field(s) implicated in one’s paid employment than the other players deem acceptable. The decision to ‘cheat’ within a field might also be contextualized by familial concerns – a desire to be publicly ‘successful’ (monetarily or otherwise) so as to maintain a specific position in the domestic microcosm, for example, like the agent who senses that their symbols of success and ability to provide a certain lifestyle are what attracted a partner to them in the first place. Gender is an inescapable structuring factor here insofar as orientations toward and possibilities within family relations and employment are systematically differentiated, in the course of social becoming, according to perceived sex (Bourdieu, 2001; Atkinson, 2016).^4^

All these modalities of disgrace implicate a feel for more than a single game. They point to perceptual horizons containing protention of the possibilities of more than one field alone, and they depend on a libido transformed into more than one field-specific illusio. They implicate what Bourdieu (2000b) fleetingly called the ‘social surface’, in other words: the individual’s collection of dispositions and schemes of perception across the fields they are implicated in, their sense of the games they are playing and (to adapt a term from Husserl) the world horizon – the filling of perceptual horizons with anticipations of the effects of activity in one field on standing in another (Atkinson, 2016). This is not to say that the agent has a clear or balanced sense of the games; just as with their sense of one game, it can be fuzzy and open to hysteresis (failure to adapt to changing circumstances) or allodoxia (the mistaking of one thing for another). It may well be that their illusio for one field is so strong that it imbalances the ‘relevance structures’ of their conscious attention, as Schutz (1970) put it: they are concerned about and think about one field (e.g. that pertaining to employment) so much that they neglect another (e.g. family). That might be an ongoing tension, or there may be a critical juncture (project deadlines, etc.) leading to a specific moment of disgrace.

The inter-field genesis of disgrace is not, however, confined to instances of dedication to one field resulting in unfavourable exchanges or nomos violation in another. It can also be that unfavourable exchange or deviation from the rules of the game in one field can have deleterious knock-on effects in another. Discovery of illegitimate practice in the economic field ruins a budding political career, for example, as the violation of the nomos of ‘fair trading’ in one field is translated into a loss of personal political capital – the capital derived from conversion of external success into symbols of political legitimacy – in the other. More pervasive, perhaps, are mutual reverberations between employment-based fields on the one hand – covering fields within the field of power as well as employing organizations as fields and, by extension, the social space itself – and the fields associated with family and sex on the other. Once again, therefore, gender relations are fundamental in myriad ways.
Regarding the familial field, first of all, public disgrace within an employment-providing field may shame partners, siblings, parents and children sufficiently for them to not only censure the individual but to engender a serious loss of affective capital – separation or cutting contact, for example. Equally, it may well be that detrimental practice relevant to the familial microcosm – domestic violence or an extramarital affair and its fallout, for instance – rebound on positioning in an employment-related field. Vincent van Gogh provides a particularly unfortunate example insofar as he seemingly suffered both fates in a downward spiral. Failure to win the affection of a young woman while working in London (an unfavourable exchange bearing on the familial field) sent him into a depressive funk, impacting upon his demeanour and practice at Goupil & Co. so severely that he was reprimanded and, eventually, fired from his post (and thus ejected from the field of art trading) – an event that, in turn, shamed his parents/siblings and soured their relations. Much more generally, and contemporarily, divorce, as a symbolic act typically sealing diminution or lack of affective capital, can lead (depending on prior resources, the nature of settlements and anticipatory strategies) to a shameful downward mobility in the social space for some women (Grella, 1990; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Thielemans and Mortelmans, 2021).

What constitutes a cross-field discreditation depends on the nomos and state of play of the implicated fields and the wider field of power at the time. The US sociologist William Isaac Thomas, for instance, lost his post at the University of Chicago in 1918 because of an affair with the wife of an army officer and, though his reputation within the disciplinary field eventually recovered, never held a tenured post again – the state of orthodoxy on familial and sexual behaviour at the time made his actions a moral outrage, but 50 years later (and 50 years ago) Lewis Coser (1971: 299) could describe it as ‘a minor indiscretion’ by ‘contemporary standards’. Moreover, insofar as lust and love, as modes of evaluation embedded in the perception of another, often blur into one another (synchronously and diachronically), both the familial field and the sexual field can be implicated in the genesis of disgrace in another field. There are, however, some instances where sex is clearly separable from love in generating disgrace across fields, specifically scandals oriented around sexual abuse and harassment of others.

The Harvey Weinstein case, which gave rise to the ‘#MeToo’ movement, is a leading example. In this instance, as in so many others, an individual is claimed to have mobilized heteronomous sources of symbolic power – command and respect within the media industry, for example, built on the capitals pertinent to the relevant field(s) – to not only satisfy his specifically sexual libido but heighten his perceived position within the sexual field and, perhaps, ‘compensate’ for a lowly position given socially devalued physical features. More than that, however, symbolic
power was wielded to force encounters, without consent, on pain of being profoundly obstructed in the acquisition of the capital – the purpose and recognition – the victims desired in the media field (e.g. via blackballing). This might be interpreted as a violation of the nomos of the sexual field which, on being made public, prompted the stripping of capital related to other fields – Weinstein’s dismissal from his production company, his expulsion from the Academy of Motion Arts and Pictures, his suspension from the British Academy of Film and Television Arts and his resignation from the Directors Guild of America. Once again, of course, what counts as a discreditable act necessitating degradation across fields depends on the state of orthodoxy at the time and the conditions of possibility for collectively ‘calling it out’, which are in turn linked to the social composition of the national and global fields of power – the proportion and positions of women within them, for example, but also the permeation and relative sway of cultural capital, and the liberal (‘politically correct’) values it tends to be associated with, following expansion of education systems across the world.

Dealing with the Fall

Rapid decline within a field can have profound emotional consequences for individuals. Their reason for being, their source of worth and self-validation, is not only removed but swiftly transformed into a source of vilification and denigration, and that vilification, and the fall, will never go away – the trajectory is forever etched into the individual’s biography, perhaps with haunting memories, but collective biography too, in the form of official histories and narratives of the field. The individual becomes a cautionary tale, a negative reference point for the time to come. The disgraced individuals are not inert, however. Their downfall may produce debilitating depression, but even so it logically produces new necessities, a new sense of what ‘must be done’, a new feel for what is feasible and possible in the struggle for recognition, though they may suffer a hysteresis effect if they are disposed toward denial – surprise and resentment at the closed doors and cold shoulders they now face, for example. In some cases, it may be that the loss of capital is so overwhelming and disorienting, and the possibilities for recovery intuited to be so limited – however that intuition may be swayed or jammed by depression, which, phenomenologically speaking, fills perceptual horizons with hopelessness and negativity – that the only viable means of escaping lack of recognition, and dealing with loss of a reason for being, is to cease to be. Even if not stamped with the ‘voluntative fiat’, as Schutz put it, popular accounts would indicate that suicide often enters the subjective field of possibles.

There are, however, other tactics for dealing with disgrace and attempting to recover position. One of these is to mobilize what capitals one has left – especially if they are heteronomous, like economic capital
or cultural capital, but also social capital in the form of continued support from particular key players – to halt or reverse the trajectory. Paying large sums to legal teams to contest allegations and win exoneration is an obvious example. Another tactic is to make a virtue of necessity and attempt to reinvent oneself as a cautionary tale – to re-establish one’s sense of worth by actively participating in, or attempting to lead, the narrative construction of one’s disgrace in the field and its lessons. Whatever capital that was lost with the fall might be regained in another form by winning recognition as a ‘sinner reborn’: someone who is an authority, worth listening to and estimable precisely because they transgressed the rules of the field, humbly repented and then used that experience to offer insights into the operations of the field – the pressures, strains, regulatory gaps and so on. This redemptive tactic seems to have been one pursued by Diederik Stapel, who attempted to confess and warn others at the same time by penning a memoir ascribing his transgression to the pressures and promises of the academic field (Stapel, 2016) and becoming a speaker at events (including TEDx) on the temptation to cheat.

A third tactic for dealing with disgrace is to switch fields. Intuiting the possibilities and impossibilities of regaining capital within the original field, and perhaps with a weakened or nullified illusio, an individual may sense that a feasible way to regain worth is simply to change the form of worth – the species of capital – she seeks.Exiting the original field and entering a new one is as close as one might be able to come to erasing one’s past and being ‘born again’, depending on the degree of infamy of the disgrace and the relation between the two fields. By no longer orienting toward or being influenced by those who had identified the disgrace and denounced it (including through physical avoidance), one can try to ‘kill off’ the being one was, since to be is, as Bourdieu (2000a) had it, to be recognized by others, and annul symbolic violence by not just refusing to recognize those who dispense it but actively evading situations and interactions associated with the field in which that violence would be experienced. Vincent van Gogh, for example, endeavoured (unsuccessfully, as it turned out) to enter the religious field after his fall from grace in the art trade so as to find solace, put distance between himself and his shameful past and prove himself worthy to his family (Naifeh and Smith, 2011).

Yet the past is sticky, and not only because old desires and orientations die hard and prompt imaginings of the narratives still spun about oneself in the exited field – a haunting by social ghosts – but because those in the new field may well be fully aware of the disgrace in the old field. This is all the more likely if the disgrace was widely disseminated via various media, but also if the new fields entered are based on similar masteries and dispositions, and one effect of this is that the disgrace can act as a barrier on entrance or acquisition of capital within the new field. A case in point is Stephen Glass, whose disgrace in the journalistic field
carried over into his subsequent efforts to enter the literary field – his ‘biographical novel’ was critically derided as cynical and self-serving (e.g. Begley, 2003) – and the legal field – despite earning a postgraduate law degree he was barred from practising law in New York and California on the grounds of moral unfitness and consigned to paralegal work (Dolan, 2014).

A fourth tactic for handling disgrace is seeking comfort or compensation in another field one already participates in, perhaps the most prominent and pervasive one being the familial field. In those cases where the balance of affective capital is enough to prevent double disgrace, and where offering support and comfort to the disgraced party can itself be a considerable ‘gift’ in the familial microcosm generating a sense of indebtedness (the disgrace thus being translated into the possibilities and impossibilities in the family field), it may well be that the self-worth derived from filial or amorous recognition is sufficient to buffer the loss of face in an employment-related field (‘where would I be without you?’). It depends, perhaps, upon the balance of the libido – the mental energy converted into diversion and striving for recognition – between fields: the intensity of the effect of disgrace and symbolic annihilation for the individual is possibly proportional to the degree of investment in the field at the expense of others. To suffer disgrace in a field is not to ‘lose everything’ if that field is not everything to the individual. Conversely, no matter how much a significant other tries to provide comfort, if the set of relations in which that comfort is embedded is of lesser value to the individual – if the significant other is not so significant, that is – then it will be less effective.

On the other hand, it may well be that the agent endeavours to make a virtue of necessity and pursue a compensation strategy: failure within a field, and the destruction of illusio that can go with it, prompt an individual to throw themselves more fully into a different field. This need not always be the familial field, and the relationship could be the other way around – failure in the family field incites one to commit more fully to a professional field as a mode of forgetting or crowding out of consciousness the negative experiences associated with that failure. Popular tropes around ‘reconsidering one’s priorities’ or ‘realizing what’s really important’ in the wake of disgrace, however, tend to revolve around re-dedicating oneself to family – a tendency facilitated by the contemporary cultural salience, with its specific social history, of amorous and parental love in defining self-worth.

**Conclusion**

There is no intrinsic reason to be, only diversion and recognition in the myriad games we play with others. Some people become dominant players in these games, others are dominated; some seek to conserve the state of play, others seek to subvert it. But amidst those broad
patterns and regularities are the manifold individuals suffering singular moments of disgrace, decline and/or exit from the game altogether. The oral or written histories of specific fields—politics, sports, science and so on—are littered with them, and they are no less explicable with the tools of sociology, and no less a legitimate object of sociological construction, than the core fault lines of power and forces of transformation. If Bourdieu’s concepts are to be fruitfully turned to that task, however, it is necessary to move beyond the typical application of those concepts. For while it may well be that one individual’s downfall within a field is anchored primarily in intra-field relations—unfavourable exchange or violation of the nomos—there are also many instances of multi-causality, i.e. where it is necessary to look beyond the individual’s practice and habitus within the one field alone and reconstruct the range of forces shaping their lifeworld, their social surface and their world horizon. Some possibilities have been proposed in this regard—imbalanced dedication to one field over another or disgrace in one field bleeding into another—as well as regarding multi-field strategies of consolation or compensation, but this is not to assume that all potentialities have been explored by any means.

The model of multi-causality presupposes a broadening of the applicability of the notion of field beyond what many typically understand of that term—as pertaining only to bodies of professionals oriented around institutionalized principles—to cover (inter alia) organizations/firms, family relations and sex. There are precedents for this in Bourdieu’s writings (at least in relation to firms and family), or in the writings of others, and it rests on the proposition that the prime criterion for the existence of a field is the emergence of a (more or less) relatively autonomous form of capital, or misrecognition, around which a discrete set of agents orient and struggle. It is necessary to underscore this because only by accommodating employment, family and sex can a field-theoretical perspective make sense of the multivalent strivings, priorities and joys of the vast bulk of the populace, rather than just a slice of the dominant class, as well as their pains, sorrows and moments of abject ignominy. Relatively famous cases have been relied upon, out of necessity, to illustrate many of the points made herein, but the logic is extendable from the disgraced media mogul or scientific Wunderkind to the man or woman whose family/sex life impinges scandalously on their employment/class position, or vice versa, and leaves them fighting to recoup a reason for being or, in some cases, questioning whether they should be at all.

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Notes

1. The general view amongst commentators was that Rousey dominated at a time when female mixed martial artists were relatively poorly supported and trained – as an Olympic judoka, she had developed a level of physical capital far beyond many at the time. Eventually, as the sport grew and female competitors began to develop greater levels of physical capital (with greater investments of economic capital), many had ‘caught up’. Her eventual defeat, however, was still exceedingly rapid and consequential.

2. The symbolic annihilation of specific agents within the economic field can operate to individualize and thus obscure the structural principles of the problems they are held to represent – as when specific individuals were blamed for the practices of Enron rather than the logic of the field (Cavender et al., 2010) or when Alan Greenspan was blamed for the economic crisis of the late 2000s while the orthodoxy he represented more or less lived on (Serafin, 2019).

3. Stapel (2016) and Glass (2003) both released first-hand accounts of events which, while they should not be taken at face value, are highly illuminating.

4. Gender is also a structuring element of intra-field falls from grace, of course, insofar as illusio and possibilities are differentiated, men and women held to different standards and discreditation strategies bound up with masculine domination whatever the state of play in other fields.

5. The precise details of what happened are unknown and open to some dispute. The ‘unrequited love’ version of events was first set out by van Gogh-Bonger (1978), but others believe the real reason van Gogh fell from favour at Goupil & Co. was because of his use of prostitutes (e.g. Naifeh and Smith, 2011), pointing instead toward illegitimate practice related to the sexual field spilling over into another field.

6. A different form of proscribed practice relating to the contemporary sexual field, paedophilia, can also bring disgrace for public figures. The popular British entertainer Rolf Harris is one example. Accusations of paedophilia famously damaged but did not destroy Michael Jackson’s reputation, perhaps because of the magnitude of his capital holdings. Where a sex scandal engulfs a player within a democratic political field (e.g. Bill Clinton) it can become a double violation since the logic of that field typically privileges honesty and integrity (cf. Thompson, 2000).

7. This point has been developed and defended at greater length in Atkinson (2016, 2020).

References


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