

Hysteresis and the sociological perspective in a time of crisis

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Hannah Graham 

University of Stirling, UK

Abstract

Hysteresis is a versatile concept for volatile times. Pierre Bourdieu's sociological use recognises hysteresis in times of dislocation and disruption between field and habitus, 'in particular, when a field undergoes a major crisis and its regularities (even its rules) are profoundly changed' (Bourdieu, 2000: 160). In considering the issues and implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, hysteresis renders visible 'multi-level, multi-temporal dynamics' (Strand and Lizardo, 2016: 169). It is attendant to the temporality of work and how workers, workplaces, workforces and fields of work are affected. The COVID-19 crisis may give rise to sudden changes such as no work (e.g. redundancies, mass unemployment), reduced work (e.g. reduced hours, underemployment), suspended work (e.g. going on furlough), or absence from work (e.g. leave and workforce absence rates). The transition to working from home and online, en masse, raises considerations of habitus and taking practice online, with many experiencing rapid digital transformation and remote working. The COVID-19 pandemic raises significant sociological issues of intersectionality and inequality, as precarity, risk and harms are experienced unevenly. There are age and gendered differences, including where working from home is in conflict with concurrent caring and home schooling responsibilities. These issues and changes, their meaning and collateral consequences, urgently warrant sociological analysis.

Keywords

Hysteresis, habitus, field, Pierre Bourdieu, sociology of work, COVID-19, pandemic, Labour market, crisis

Hysteresis is a versatile concept for volatile times. Born from scientific thinking about earthquakes and metals in relation to a changing magnetic field, its original use is attributed to eminent Scottish physicist and engineer James Alfred Ewing (1855–1935). Various disciplines have since harnessed this concept – biology, physics, economics, education, psychology – to explain mismatch, inflexibility or lasting effects in response to crisis and change.

Corresponding Author:

Hannah Graham, Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research, Colin Bell Building, University of Stirling, Stirling, FK9 4LA, UK.
Email h.m.graham@stir.ac.uk

Pierre Bourdieu's sociological use recognises hysteresis in times of dislocation and disruption between field and habitus, 'in particular, when a field undergoes a major crisis and its regularities (even its rules) are profoundly changed' (Bourdieu, 2000: 160). Hysteresis occurs where habitus falls out of alignment with the field in which it operates, experienced as lag or disconnect amid changing circumstances, where taken-for-granted assumptions seem less relevant (Bourdieu, 1990). It feels like living in a different time, carrying risks and opportunities (Bourdieu, 2015; Fowler, 2020).

In considering the issues and implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, hysteresis renders visible 'multi-level, multi-temporal dynamics' (Strand and Lizardo, 2016: 169). It is attendant to the temporality of work and how workers, workplaces, workforces and fields of work are affected. This is not a time of business as usual. A 'feel for the game' predicated on relationships and regularities of the game and field structures as they were in the past, *pre-pandemic*, is no longer fit for purpose. Bourdieusian sociology illuminates hysteresis as a kind of maladapted habitus, especially when crises and conflicts become effectively synchronised across fields (Fowler, 2020), as they are in the coronavirus pandemic.

Work and fields of work are changing, particularly in places with lockdown restrictions and physical distancing. These changes, some of which are briefly summarised here, and their meaning and collateral consequences urgently warrant sociological analysis. Hysteresis is one of a myriad of thinking tools with which to make sense of them.

These changes may include no work (e.g. redundancies, mass unemployment), reduced work (e.g. reduced hours, underemployment), suspended work (e.g. furlough), or absence from work (e.g. leave and workforce absence rates). The pandemic and lockdown restrictions have disrupted Europe's labour market recovery, with rising unemployment and more than 40 million people across Europe furloughed through government-subsidised job retention schemes (Arnold and Romei, 2020). Meanwhile, others work through it, as 'key workers'.

The transition to working from home and online, en masse, raises considerations of habitus and taking practice online, with many experiencing rapid digital transformation and remote working. Zoom fatigue enters common parlance. Some changes may prompt a sense of disconnect with established professional identities and dispositions while not being able to do certain valued features of work. The scale of crisis and change may be distinctive in particular lines of work or fields of work. To what extent does a sense of hysteresis emerge for people in the helping professions in the public sector, such as teachers or social workers, in working from home and doing at a distance, in ways mostly unfamiliar in their career to date? Those whose work might be considered vital in helping with recovery and rebuilding in emerging from COVID-19 – in charities and non-government organisations – are facing precarity, financial crisis and closure, at a time when need is spiralling (Fraser, 2020).


The COVID-19 pandemic raises significant sociological issues of intersectionality and inequality, as precarity, risk and harms are experienced unevenly. Hysteresis is differential in its effects (Hardy, 2014). Social-structural influences of class and symbolic capital come to the fore, as hysteresis 'is itself shaped by the configuration of power relations' (McDonough and Polzer, 2012: 359). There are age and gendered differences, including where working from home is in conflict with concurrent caring and home schooling responsibilities. Also, limited opportunities may result in 'career shock' (Akkermans et al., 2020), in the short term at least, with work-related travel and gatherings, sabbaticals, rewards and bonuses, recruitment, promotion rounds and career progression opportunities cancelled or suspended.

Crisis invites questions and visions of the future of work. What futures are people working towards? How do workers experiencing hysteresis resist or adapt to changes? Which workers and workforces benefit and who loses or suffers from newly altered field structures? To what extent are there continuities in the social stratification of work, unemployment and labour market risks during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (see Lahtinen et al., 2018)? How do changes to work affect identity and culture (whether in organisational or occupational contexts)? What emancipatory action and transformative social change is possible (see Fowler, 2020)? Research is patently needed. The utility of hysteresis as a thinking tool is how it foregrounds the relevance of the sociological perspective in critically analysing one of the most salient crises of our lifetimes.

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ORCID iD

Hannah Graham  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0176-6350>

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Author biography

Hannah Graham is a senior lecturer in criminology at the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research in the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stirling, Scotland. Previously, she studied and then worked as an academic in the sociology department of the University of Tasmania, Australia. Hannah is an editor of the *European Journal of Probation* (SAGE). She is an author or editor of four books published internationally by Routledge, including *Rehabilitation Work: Supporting Desistance and Recovery* (2016).