



# Road capitals: Reconceptualising street capital, value production and exchange in the context of road life in the UK

Current Sociology

1–17

© The Author(s) 2021

Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/00113921211001086

[journals.sagepub.com/home/csi](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/csi)**Yusef Bakkali** 

De Montfort University, UK

## Abstract

This article engages with existing applications of Bourdieusian (habitus, field and capitals) theory as applied to ‘street’ settings. It advocates for the recognition of strategies developed by those involved in road life, a UK variant form of street culture, to mobilise capital from the ‘street field’ in order to facilitate exchanges into less subordinate social fields/spaces. Drawing on Bourdieu’s three metaphors of social, economic and cultural capital, this article illustrates ways these forms of capital can and are being mobilised by youth engaged in ‘street’ settings (on road), in the hope of gaining advancement both in street spaces and beyond. This is in contrast with some criminological thinking which tends to take a ‘narrow’ focus on the criminogenic aspects of marginalised men’s lives, missing at times the full range of agency and expression of those affected by and/or involved in street value systems, as well as the wider struggles which take place over the value they create.

## Keywords

Bourdieu, habitus, rap music, road capitals, street capital

## Introduction

In this article I draw on a contemporary study concerning Road Life (Bakkali, 2018, 2019): a form of street culture operating in British urban centres, which is heavily influenced by Black diasporic cultural practices (Gilroy, 1993). I argue that young men active

---

### Corresponding author:

Yusef Bakkali, Legacy in Action Fellow, Stephen Lawrence Research Centre, De Montfort University, Hugh Aston Building, Richmond Street, Leicester, LE1 9BH, UK.

Email: [Yusef.bakkali@dmu.ac.uk](mailto:Yusef.bakkali@dmu.ac.uk)

in 'road culture' are involved not just in a struggle for position within the street setting, but they seek to exchange value accrued in the streets across other less subordinate social spaces. This struggle for value involves the accumulation and exchange of relevant forms of what are here termed 'road capitals'. These are to be understood as context specific variants of Bourdieu's (1986) *cultural, economic and social capitals*. In order to do this, I build on contemporary applications of Bourdieusian theory in marginalised 'street' settings (e.g. Ilan, 2013; Rahman, 2019; Sandberg, 2008; Sandberg and Pedersen, 2011; Shammas and Sanberg, 2016). This article adds to this existing body of research by theorising around the possibilities for capital specific to the street field (Shammas and Sandberg, 2016) being exchanged across more mainstream social spaces.

The article demonstrates how young men of varying dispositions or 'habitus' draw on different forms of capital, valued in the street field, as part of a strategy to attempt to achieve a more included social status. In order to make this argument the article will begin by discussing road life and the kinds of stakeholders invested in struggles over value emanating from this space. It will then proceed to demonstrate how applications of Bourdieusian theory can be developed to offer more nuanced understandings. From there follows a short methodological section relating to the study on road life from which the data derive. Finally, utilising this data, illustrations are drawn from individual case studies in order help to illuminate the novel concept of 'road capitals' and how these can facilitate strategies for social inclusion, though not always successful ones.

## Road life

Road life is a UK specific street cultural formation (Bakkali, 2019; Gunter, 2008, 2010) which is heavily influenced by transatlantic Black diasporic cultural forms (Gilroy, 1993). These include, but are not limited to, modes of: speech, comportment, fashion and musical expression (in particular hip hop music), which tend to find their origins in Black communities in North America and the Caribbean. Similarly, to the term 'urban' (White, 2017), 'street' can be (mis)understood as a deracialising proxy for marginalised groups, particularly those from the Black community. The relationship between road life and Black diasporic cultural practice should not lead to assumptions that it can be understood in exclusively racial or ethnic terms (Bakkali, 2019; Gunter, 2008). In reality road life 'cuts across ethnicity' (Gunter and Watt, 2009: 520) in terms of participation and cultural contribution. However, we should be attentive to the ways it draws value from the reservoirs of Black diasporic cultural production.

The concept of 'road life' has appeared in various criminological work, including studies which focus on male prisoners (Glynn, 2014; Hallsoworth and Silverstone, 2009), gangs (Hallsoworth, 2013) and gun crime (Hallsoworth and Silverstone, 2009). For example, Hallsoworth and Silverstone (2009: 362) offered vivid descriptions relating to criminogenic aspects of road life, describing it as a 'violent and volatile social milieu'. Whilst these studies pick up on 'spectacular' aspects of life on road, Gunter (2010) was concerned with everyday practices in these spaces, highlighting that on road, life is about getting by; with criminality an active but not all-encompassing element in this (Gunter, 2008, 2010). Whilst the ambiguous links between criminality and violence serve

practical purposes in this process of everyday survival (Anderson, 1999), there is also an aesthetic element to this ambivalent relationship. This often helps in the manufacture of reservoirs of ‘coolness’ and status for the socially maligned, who are able to mobilise ideas and tropes connected to their excluded status in ways that might, in limited circumstances, benefit them (Ilan, 2015).

These practices can be geared toward recognition in the more immediate locality, but also offer the possibility for recognition further afield. Tropes associated with street culture (and also criminality) have been commodified by corporations as part of marketing strategies globally (Ilan, 2015), with road culture no different in this respect. Sometimes this commodification of road coolness plays very explicitly on elements heavily associated with criminality; for example, Puma recently sparked controversy by holding a ‘traphouse’ themed event entitled *House of Hu\$tle* (Oppenheim, 2018) drawing on themes related to drug dealing in UK street cultural spaces (Reid, 2017).

This market-based fascination with street culture has also enabled the formation of specialist cultural producers (Bourdieu, 1979) who are able to straddle ‘the apex between perceived authenticity and commercial mass production/consumption’ (Ilan, 2015: 122). Contemporary examples of these individuals in relation to road life are UK rap artists, such as Stormzy, J Hus and Skepta. In this context music is a source of value and a way of giving voice and coherence to youth and street cultures (Fatsis, 2019). New technological platforms such as YouTube and Spotify enable artists to mobilise popular culture as a medium to trade the value of the street into the mainstream, circumventing ways in which Black music has historically been policed in the UK (Fatsis, 2019; White, 2017).

The connection between criminality and the street also attracts other stakeholders from fields closer to the ‘central field of power’ (Bourdieu, 2020). Many of these institutions and actors seek to involve themselves in the policing and control of street cultural spaces, often garnering symbolic capital in the process. One example of this is what has become known as the ‘gang industry’ (Hallsworth, 2013), which involves the conflation of various social problems into a gang problem, in order to attract capital to those tasked with suppressing it. A wide range of actors are involved in this, including; third sector organisations, academics, politicians and the police.

With multiple stakeholders, from multiple social fields, seeking to mobilise value deriving from the street field, this article contends that those occupying street spaces also develop similar strategies. Those strategies outlined here demonstrate how mobilising value garnered on road can be part of a process geared towards transitions across social space. This article will proceed to briefly discuss some existing applications of Bourdieusian theory in street settings with a view to understanding how new applications may help us to differently understand the contemporary struggle taking place in these spaces.

## Applying Bourdieu in street settings

Various authors have drawn on Bourdieu’s notions of field, habitus and capital in relation to studies focusing on marginalised ‘street’ communities (e.g. Fraser, 2015; Ilan, 2013; Rahman, 2019; Sandberg, 2008; Sandberg and Fleetwood, 2017; Sandberg and Pedersen, 2011; Shammas and Sandberg, 2016). The concept of street capital has prevailed across many of these studies. These develop from Sandberg’s and Pedersen’s (2011) notion of

street capital, which is closely tied to the concept of habitus. *Habitus* is best understood as a schematic framework of ‘durable dispositions’ and behaviours developed in relation ‘to individual history’ or experience (Bourdieu, 1993: 86) of the social world. This is a kind of ‘practical sense’ which enables people to navigate their specific social field, within which certain hierarchies and logics prevail.

Sandberg and Pedersen (2011) equate street capital to the embodiment of an effective ‘street habitus’ which is oriented toward the specific threats and values operative in marginalised street fields. In this sense street capital ‘is a form of legitimate power that is relational and has the capacity to generate profit’ (Sandberg and Pedersen, 2011: 168). In the context of their study street capital meant the mastery of skills which made young men effective actors in the illicit cannabis market of Oslo, this involved skills like: preparedness to use violence, a vigilance for plain clothed police officers, fashion sense and sexual desirability. Street capital in this conception shares qualities with Bourdieusian notions of social capital and cultural capital, but due to the kinds of dispositions central to the effective accrual of street capital not being valued more widely across social space the authors draw a distinction between them:

As with cultural capital, street capital can be converted in to economic capital, and it is closely linked to the social capital of its possessors. As opposed to cultural capital, however, it is difficult to transfer to other social arenas. (Sandberg and Pedersen, 2011: 168)

Sandberg (2008) also initially raised doubts about the possibility for street culture(s) to be understood as a social field in an orthodox sense due to the lack of formal institutions; later however Shammas and Sandberg (2016) contend that this does not discount the possibility of a street field, as many fields operate outside of the boundaries of official institutions. They view the street as offering a comparatively self-contained and competitive social space, distinct from other more mainstream social fields. In the ‘street field’, they identified a social space where a range of actors engage in an agonistic struggle over ‘prizes and profits’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 98 cited in Shammas and Sandberg, 2016: 200), giving rise to street specific logics and practices, which themselves provide the framework to inform the street habitus.

Shammas and Sandberg (2016) are doubtful though about the transferability of capitals produced in the street field. They comment on Ilan’s (2013) notion of ‘street social capital’ claiming that investment in social networks which are likely to help one succeed in street settings are also likely to represent a disinvestment in social capital valued in other social fields (Shammas and Sandberg, 2016). However, there are elements of Shammas and Sandberg’s (2016) analysis of the ‘street field’ which leave possibilities for more dynamic or destabilised modes of habitus emerging amongst those occupying this space, something which might better facilitate exchange across social space.

Such a factor is the positioning of the street field as a relatively subordinate field, in relation to other fields occupying positions closer to the field of power, as well as being overlapped by various other, often more powerful fields and institutions (as seen in the previous section, e.g. criminal justice, advertising, education and academia). These factors make the ‘street field’ less autonomous and likely less able to maintain ‘specific

logics' in the face of 'external determinants that bear on agents situated in a given field' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 105). In addition to this, the proximal relationship the street field has with other fields is also a feature with the potential to cause destabilisation which must be investigated empirically, as Bourdieu himself explains 'there are *no transhistoric laws of the relations between fields* . . . we must investigate each historical case separately' (1992: 109).

Alistair Fraser (2015) provides one such investigation. He drew heavily on the notion of street habitus in his ethnography focusing on gangs in Glasgow. Fraser's (2015: 128) interpretation of street habitus is particularly interesting as it is sensitised to both the ways in which durable street dispositions are cultivated and enacted as well as the ways in which 'this process operates in dialectical relation to shifts in the economic landscape of the city and is therefore subject to change'. He describes how neoliberalising processes have led to the privatisation of public spaces where street habitus is learnt and performed. These shifts in public space, policing and youth leisure choices have affected the development of street habitus. Fraser draws on Gunter's (2010) notion of the road culture continuum to highlight the ways young men living in these settings have both differential and dynamic levels of commitment to traditionally observed street cultural dispositions, often varying over the life course.

These observations of less durable or at times multiple dispositions share similarities with notions such as the 'torn' or 'cleft habitus' (Bourdieu, 1999, 2000). A concept demonstrating how exposure to different fields or social spaces might cause a 'destabilized habitus' (Bourdieu, 2000), something Bourdieu (1999: 511) describes thus:

A habitus divided against itself, in constant negotiation with itself and its ambivalences, and therefore doomed to a kind of duplication, to a double perception of the self, to successive allegiance and multiple identities.

Spaces on the intersections of social fields have also been characterised as 'zones of uncertainty in social space' (Bourdieu, 2000: 157 cited in Inghilleri, 2005: 70) whereby agents experience the 'convergence of conflicting world views that momentarily upset the relevant habitus' (Inghilleri, 2005: 71). Research on higher education has explored how working-class students attending universities reconcile such experiences (e.g. Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Ingram, 2011; Reay et al., 2009). In the case of Abrahams and Ingram (2013: 216), the authors argue a cleft habitus can become a resource, representing a 'cleavage in the habitus that can generate dynamic processes of habitus revision'. These authors described the development of a 'chameleon habitus' which through both reflexive and pre-reflexive processes enabled them to reconcile contradictions in the habitus and shift between fields. This is in keeping with the conditional potential for alteration theorised in relation to 'zones of uncertainty, [which] although they represent relatively weak social positions, are nevertheless endowed with the potential to create new forms of legitimate social practice' (Inghilleri, 2005: 71).

Silva (2016: 179) advocates for the notion of the 'fragmented habitus', in order to 'understand the effects of the concomitant belongings of individuals to diverse fields of practice'. Drawing on an analysis of Bourdieu's developing thinking on habitus, Silva (2016) argues that processes of social change, field dynamics and capital composition

are crucial factors in understanding how the habitus works to adapt to and integrate the pulls of different social fields.

We can see from this that wider social processes, which in themselves partially blur boundaries between fields, create conditions for adaptation in the habitus. Though this is not necessarily 'transgressive' (Bourdieu, 2020) as it is a process serving to reintegrate agents' habitus to the conditions of their social world, it may still result in new strategies of practice.

In the context of the street field, neoliberalising processes, accompanied by technological and cultural shifts, have transformed the landscape for young men living in the proximity of street cultures in the UK in myriad ways. We may consider the increased state led drive to 'raise aspirations' (Spohrer, 2016) amongst underprivileged youth over the last two decades, alongside welfare reforms which saw increased conditionality and reduced payments and increased cultural sanction on poverty (Hancock and Mooney, 2013). These material and symbolic shifts are being felt acutely by marginalised young men (Bakkali, 2019). State led drives to produce aspirant individuals have coincided with technological advancement and the growth of the online world. This has itself facilitated both possibilities and risks for marginalised young people via the increased popularity of 'urban' culture and music in Britain (Pinkney and Robinson-Edwards, 2018; White, 2017).

My argument in this article involves understanding ways in which individuals can *attempt* to mobilise value derived from 'street' value systems to achieve a degree of mainstream recognition or inclusion. This is reflective of the *situatedness* of young men at the intersections of multiple social fields, living in the context of wider structural changes, leading them to develop dispositions which value aspiration, social inclusion and mobility in ways that previous accounts of street settings may have overlooked. The purpose for separating out street capital into economic, social and cultural capital is to help to demonstrate the ways in which different resources valued in street settings can be strategically mobilised/exchanged to different ends. This offers some, if *still limited*, possibilities for recognition of agency amongst marginalised young men to manoeuvre both within and beyond street spaces. This is an approach committed to understanding the ways in which marginalised young men, '[f]acing one period of economic dislocation after another, . . . have always found creative, if controversial, ways to pursue their dreams' (Stuart, 2020: 18). After outlining the methodological approach of the study, this article will proceed to outline an application of Bourdieusian field and capitals theory in the context of road life in the UK.

## Methodology

In this article I will use empirical material derived from the accounts of young men on road who are striving for value both within and beyond street cultural spaces. The project involved 12 biographical narrative interviews with young adults. A purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) approach was used, developing an intensity sample (Patton, 1990) which identified rich cases offering enough breadth and depth to attempt to capture a range of experiences of life on road. In the context of this study, this approach was used to select participants who had various kinds of experiences of road life as well as different trajectories in terms of family life, education and work. The rationale for this breadth of sampling was embedded in Gunter's (2008) road culture continuum, which states that those most involved in road life do not occupy the 'spectacular' or violent (Gunter, 2008) end of it. Therefore, attempting to focus singularly on the most criminal elements of this

youth culture could lead to potentially misleading outcomes, obscuring many mundane and non-spectacular elements of road life.

My positionality to the research field was important in shaping this process. Having grown up in a working-class family in Brixton, south London the majority of participants in this study came from my own friendship networks. This personal knowledge of participants was combined with one qualifying criterion in the selection of participants: that the participant themselves felt competent and well placed to discuss matters relating to life on road. My personal relationship with individual participants would vary from close friends to more casual acquaintances, but in all but one interview (which was arranged via a snowballing method), participant and researcher were well known to one another. This denoted that there were 'varying degrees of insiderness' (Contreras, 2015) in operation across interview encounters, meaning that each was qualitatively different. Some participants had known me as an adolescent, myself trying to make sense of a world in which road life was real and proximate, whereas others knew me only as a doctoral student perhaps more detached from such experiences. Of course, these dynamics also varied between male and female participants, as well as depending on the educational and career trajectories of the individual participants.

However, these differences did not equate to more or less richness in the data and it was this dynamic which influenced the unstructured ethnographic nature of the interview encounters (Heyl, 2001). The interviews were able to draw on the shared experiences and existing rapport necessary for myself as the researcher to meaningfully explore 'the meanings they [participants] place in their worlds' (Heyl, 2001: 369).

The project developed in an inductive fashion, working outwards from the data rather than attempting to test an existing hypothesis (Patton, 1990). The mode of analysis utilised 'sensitising concepts' (Blumer, 1954). As these sensitising concepts developed they served to incubate and further interrogate findings as they emerged from the data. This borrows much from grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 1990) in that it draws on 'interpretive devices' helping to anchor the researcher in such a way that enables them to gain purchase on 'a deep understanding of social phenomena' (Bowen, 2006: 20).

The development of theoretical innovation was dependent on this inductive method. Reflexive engagement with participants helped develop understanding of subtler sources of anguish and sites of struggle in their lives, leading to the development of notions of road capitals. This article will proceed to draw on these data to outline the ways in which young men have sought to mobilise value on road through the treacherous but somehow permeable borders of the legitimate economy. Drawing on Bourdieu's metaphors of capital, the article aims to map out the ways in which strategies are constantly developed, seeking to utilise the capital composition of the individual to advance them both within the field and in wider social spaces.

## **Road capitals – Strategies for exchange and inclusion**

This section will proceed to outline how conceptualising road culture as a relational street field can be fruitful in helping to capture the complexity of strategic agency amongst young men with differential levels of engagement in road life. The examples have been selected in order to demonstrate how these young men developed *situated* strategies drawing on the 'capital composition' (Bourdieu, 1993) and structural possibilities available to them.

Crucially, this understanding of ‘road capitals’ draws on dynamic understandings of youth road cultural participation which highlight the ways young men ‘dip in and out’ (Gunter, 2008) of certain aspects of street cultural participation, including criminality. Gunter (2008, 2010) understood this as being a part of the ‘road cultural continuum’ where young men had differential, dynamic and temporal involvements with the world of ‘badness’. This approach recognises the ways in different social fields such as education, family and the online world combine with a mixture of life events, social networks, location and structural conditions to play an important role in influencing youth trajectories.

As highlighted earlier in the article, capital is readily drawn from the street field by an array of stakeholders and this itself has become a site of struggle. This article is seeking to argue that marginalised young men themselves are participants in this struggle, seeking to mobilise in the ways that they can, capital deriving from the street field. This is not necessarily for the purpose of rising within the street field, but with a view for exchanging, or facilitating the exchange of other forms of capital into less subordinate social fields. This does not equal straightforward exchanges or transitions, but instead highlights the ways in which strategies emerge from the social conditions and trajectories of the young men themselves. These intuitive strategies differ based on circumstances and capital composition, with some failing to realise the desired exchange value and others proving more successful.

This aspiration to transcend the limitations of life on road came across strongly in many of the interviews. The limits outlined in contemporary criminological observation about the lack of perceived possibilities available to those embodying street habitus were not lost on participants – many of them were determined not to become trapped themselves. However, this did not lead them to totally neglect the possibilities road life might have to offer them in terms of personal advancement. This logic was well exemplified in this short extract, from former self-identifying gang member, Stephen:

Stephen: . . . the whole point of the road stuff is for you to get what you can and then *get out* . . .

Though we will not explore Stephen’s story in more detail here the reader will be introduced to three other male participants in the following section. They have each been involved in life on road, by their own accounts, but this involvement along with their educational and career trajectories has varied considerably. Each story will help to elucidate how individuals develop strategies to harness different kinds of capital (social, economic and cultural) derived from road to facilitate exchange into wider social space. This approach seeks to demonstrate how different kinds of capital can be drawn upon depending on individual capital composition and circumstances. Each participant will be briefly introduced below.

Moussa is the first participant who will be covered in detail. His story will offer up a more detailed example of a strategy for advancement via the accumulation of economic capital on road. Moussa was in his early mid-twenties at the time of interview and had graduated from university (after studying construction) a couple of years earlier. He is of Black African heritage and grew up on a council estate in London. Moussa was unique in relation to the rest of the cohort in the study as he had achieved academically whilst

maintaining a strong sense of respect on road. Upon graduating from university, he struggled to find graduate employment, leading him to accumulate economic capital on road to try to help him to become self-employed in the construction industry.

The second story involves Jeremiah, who is of mixed heritage (Black Caribbean and White British). He came from a single parent household which highly valued education, but experienced great precarity in relation to income and housing, leading to them moving a number of times during his youth. In spite of these difficulties, Jeremiah, supported by his family, excelled in education and eventually graduated from an elite university and at the time of interview was working in a professional job. Jeremiah's account will help the reader to understand ways in which road social capital can be valuable to legitimate transitions in potentially unexpected ways.

The final participant drawn upon in this article is T. He was in his early twenties at the time of interview and is of Latin American descent. He had spent the previous decade connected to various self-identifying gang incarnations, for which he gained notoriety on road. In his late teens he served a prison sentence of several years. On returning from prison T drew on the cultural capital he accrued from gang involvement to help him, over a period of years, to forge a successful music career.

## Economic road capital

This section focuses on how those on road attempt to mobilise economic capital accrued within the street field, with a view to exchanging it into wider social spaces. It follows Moussa's frustration with the lack of possibilities offered by the graduate job market, and how he attempted to mobilise economic road capital in order to overcome these challenges. Below he outlines his frustrations:

Moussa: . . . they're not gonna choose man like man, you know . . . *as soon as they hear man's voice compared to the next man that's speaking like, George Osborne or something like that, they're gonna choose George Osborne, they're not gonna choose man, unless they got their equality right, where they haaaaavve to choose someone like me* [laughs] . . . I seen it man, I applied, I've had mad good grades yeah and I've been applying [for graduate jobs], but *I didn't get one interview bruv, not one interview!* I was like man, I'm thinking maybe I'm applying for that shit wrong man, *but it wasn't me*, obviously it was the recession and that like, but like *not one interview!*

Moussa had attained cultural capital in the form of a university degree, but this extract demonstrates that his lack of embodied cultural capital and social capital hindered him in the graduate job market, limiting his ability to 'stand in different spaces' (Silva, 2016). After many years of avoiding participation in the illicit economy and instead focusing on education, Moussa decided to develop a new strategy. This involved accruing economic capital on road and using his expertise in the construction industry to set up a legitimate business. He and some friends built a small-scale drug operation in a nearby university city, an enterprise which is commonly known as 'county lines' drug dealing (Robinson

et al., 2019). This was a strategy which would enable him to exchange this road economic capital, drawing on his expertise in construction, for economic and social capital in the field of construction, as he explains below:

- Moussa: I'm not the sort of person just to go and trap [sell drugs] for any reason, I need a purpose and man's actual purpose was to start a business init . . .
- Yusef: What sort of business was you going to go in to?
- Moussa: . . . The first one was property yeah, man just wanted to get a deposit for a house, to get on to a house. The next ting was a van ting init, man wanted to do the skip thing, get a few skips, buy a van . . . and you just get on to the construction that way, so I was still trying to get in to the construction thing init but I never had no start up peas [money], and this graduate construction thing wasn't working init, I applied hundreds of times and I still didn't get that so . . .
- Yusef: What was you doing? Trappin'?
- Moussa: Yeah I had a little green [cannabis] ting, I little-nothing big and that but I could have made money . . . I would have made a lot of money bruv, 'cause I was doing at one point it was like a box a week . . . it was-it was proper . . . but because when the feds were on man's shoulder, it was only that time that man got nicked . . . I got charged with it init and I caught possession with intent init . . . so I just took the guilty, man's still on suspended sentence . . .

Whilst to some extent it could be said that this example of accruing economic capital on road could be seen as further establishing existing forces of exclusion, this should be properly caveated. Moussa's limited success in the graduate job market left him to rely on his social and cultural capital on road. He was able to draw on these to try to raise economic capital on road to reposition his terms of inclusion in the legitimate job market. This demonstrates a doxa whereby individuals seek to mobilise economic capital derived from street fields to exchange into wider social spaces. Of course, there are significant barriers to this type of capital exchange, meaning that actors seeking to mobilise road capital in this way experience significant difficulty making successful exchanges. However, it has been demonstrated that there is significant porosity between the licit and illicit economies (Hudson, 2013), suggesting that similar strategies may sometimes reap the possibility for exchange. Next, we will examine how road social capital can be utilised as a strategy for exchange between social fields. Jeremiah offers a very different kind of strategy that can be developed in the context of a very different road capital composition.

## Road social capital

In order for young men to transition from road life into more mainstream understandings of inclusion, they must be able to manage multiple pressures and call on support from a range of social locations. Ilan (2013) recognised that the social bonds formed by street orientated youth help them to get by in the street, observing that these bonds 'bridge' the spatial insecurities faced by marginalised young men, offering them possibilities for

friendship, accessing markets and opportunities to perform street cultural capital. Whilst he argues that street social capital offers opportunities for young men to advance in street settings, it has limited value for advancement beyond street spaces. He also emphasises the ways in which biography and other structural factors are relevant in determining the effectiveness of street social capital across social space. The example below looks to further caveat this by offering the account of Jeremiah, who necessarily mobilised road social capital to facilitate his trajectory into a legitimate career.

Jeremiah's story serves as a testament to how those who wish to make the transition through legitimate means must at times mobilise their networks on road. He could be regarded as a poster child of the raising aspirations initiatives. Coming from an economically disadvantaged, single parent, minority ethnic background he managed to attend an elite university and later secure professional employment. However, at various times he relied heavily on his social networks on road to help him to achieve this by keeping him physically secure as he experienced significant insecurity in his life. Below Jeremiah described how his early interactions with life on road were mediated through his extended network of cousins, who though at times exposed him to potential risks, generally looked after his safety in the context of hazardous neighbourhood spaces.

Jeremiah: . . . I would go up for at least a week and stay with my cousin who is like three years older than me. So, like, yeah, he's like three years older than me, he lived in like-kind of a grimey part of [the city] and like my cousins, so like there's like two main gangs and erm, they were like, like one group of my cousins were in one and another group were like affiliated to another . . . [so] generally I was quite protected because I was always rolling with like older people.

Jeremiah's description of times spent with his cousins are reminiscent of Bourdieu's (2020) reflections of the process of 'cousining' whereby, in the real world, a degree of investment is required in familial relationships for any social capital to be drawn from them. This network was important in helping him to navigate actual and potential threats and served as an important form of social capital. One such instance where road social capital performed this function for Jeremiah is described in detail below:

Jeremiah: But anyway, we moved [neighbourhoods] . . . I remember like this guy in my [new] school a couple years older than me, like because I was in year 9, like he *tried to bully me*. Like 'cause what happened was I had started the school and all the girls were like '*AAHHH it's a London guy!!*'. . . when I started the piffest [prettiest] girl in the school was in my year, and she was going out with like '*the guy*' in the whole school, who was in year 11, like do you know what I mean?

Yusef: Yeah yeah

Jeremiah: And this guy was nuts, like I think the week that I started he got arrested because he got his samurai sword out in the middle of the street . . . so I basically-she was on it and they had broken up, so I moved her up [chatted her up] . . . then like I broke my arm a month later and then

when I broke my arm that's when he started to like try bully me. And I remember for a couple of days, 'cause I think I didn't wanna get all my cousins involved . . . So, for a few days I want kinda having it . . . And I remember once he came and like tried to twist my finger whilst my arm's *broken*, like in a brace . . . so eventually I told my cousins init, and they came down and it all got sorted and it was fine after that.

Jeremiah's cousins attending his school helped to secure him in the space and enhance his possibilities for educational progression. The strength of his social network prevented him from having to develop the kind of street habitus which Sandberg and Pedersen (2011) observe to be disadvantageous in wider social space. In Jeremiah's case he was moving between the pulls of the educational field, the family and the street field. His capital composition was such that as a capable student with a family invested in education he could accrue cultural capital valued in school, but required social capital on road to help to secure his continued educational engagement and achievement. Below I will consider the ways cultural capital might be mobilised by those on road.

### Road cultural capital

Road cultural capital is comparable to street capital, which is used 'to describe better the embodied character of skills and competence on the street, as well as the practical rationality of street culture' (Sandberg and Pederson, 2011: 43). Whilst road cultural capital could be disadvantageous in other social fields, there are still possibilities for its exchange beyond the confines of the street field. T offers us one example of someone who has managed to tread this fine line of exchange. The self-identifying gang T belonged to became quite notorious at both local and national levels, publicly known to be sitting high on the list of priorities of Trident Gang Command for several years. Whilst many of the young men involved in this group have suffered hardship, death and imprisonment, a small number have also managed to cultivate highly successful careers in the entertainment industry. T has been one of these, having been able to gradually transition into a career in UK rap music. This slow transition is reflected in T's early engagements with rap music as a local form of expression and leisure rather than a strategy for inclusion:

T: . . . the first time, I started rapping, was when . . . I was about 13 but it was just for-as a joke on my computer, I think everyone's had a go on their computer when they was 12–13.

As a teen T had a computer and a mic set up in his bedroom which boys from the area would use to record freestyles over popular hip hop and grime beats. This soon became entangled with local conflict and hierarchal struggles, in the form of neighbourhood and gang rivalries. Whilst these conflicts did intensify social exclusion and cause harm to young men in the area, they were also a source of value generating notoriety for local youths who participated. This coincided with the growth of free-to-use digital platforms like Myspace, Facebook and YouTube, which offered a way of amplifying local value

systems. This process marked the start of young men in the neighbourhood drawing wider audiences using their, previously localised, road cultural capital. This process demonstrates a kind of integration of social change into everyday forms of practice. Below he elaborates on the way he and his peers would share ‘diss’ songs over Myspace in order to publicise their local struggles for value:

T: . . . we’ll be dissing other people in a song so that we could get more views on Myspace . . . [The gang] had a little fan base, of the music we was releasing and stuff, as a gang . . .

Whilst T’s gang activity did serve to draw him further into the more violent and marginal aspects of road life, music offered him a lifeline to a more included status. At 16 T was sent to prison for several years, and on his release, he began to pursue music as a possibility to provide for his young son and stay out of trouble. His connection to well-known gangs and history of appearing in local DVDs and Myspace profiles gave T a rich well of road cultural capital to draw from to launch his music career. He is typically known as an artist concerned with street discourse, offering depictions of the gritty realities of road life:

T: Yeah, I rap about the life on the road, how I’ve struggled, like in the past and shit and the jail time I’ve experienced and all of that.

Stuart (2020: 39), in his study of Chicago drill artists, notes that street involved youths commonly engage with music as a strategy for desistance in crime, despite ‘displaying and representing violent criminality’ in their lyrics and videos. He also notes that young artists are also conscious of the fact that seemingly authentic street representations (cultural capital) are potentially more important than lyrical dexterity in gaining traction online. Below T describes the process he went through to professionalise his music:

T: So, I came out [of prison] . . . and just from then I just started doing the music and stopped committing like proper crime, like robberies and stuff . . . when I come out I wanted to do it seriously and my lyrics was, for the public, not just for my friends. So yeah that’s when I started pursuing it properly . . . it kicked off for me, the music, I was still on tag while I was going to erm, studios, when I come out of jail . . . and I just said let me just put out a song on YouTube again . . . I put one out in February 2011 and I got a lot of feedback, it got like erm 10,000 views overnight . . . in 2011 it was kind of rare to see like 10,000 views overnight from someone who’s just brand new. So, I that’s when I got in to the music properly and I saw that I was getting a buzz, a music buzz from it . . .

The numbers T reports above may be insignificant by contemporary standards, but he is an artist who has managed to increase his fan base as the UK Rap scene has itself developed. It is common for him and other artists from the same neighbourhood to achieve views and

streams in the multi-millions. This enables them to achieve a living via a kind of ‘micro-celebrity’ status (Stuart, 2020) drawing revenue from a variety of channels, including radio play, streaming, live shows, merchandise and music downloads (White, 2017).

T himself cultivated forms of road cultural capital, which are often theorised as disadvantageous in wider social spaces, in order to make a transition to a more included social status. This should still be recognised as a precarious and risk laden strategy, but it is representative of a broader understanding on road, relating to value and inclusion. Whilst perhaps music and sport themselves are stereotypically recognised as endeavours for street affected youth to pursue, we should still take seriously the stories of youths who pursue them. They, like many actors in other fields, are (perhaps unconsciously) analysing their capital composition and developing strategies for their advancement using what they have available to them in order to do so.

## Conclusion

This article has built on existing literature which has applied Bourdieusian concepts of habitus, field and capitals in street cultural settings (Harding, 2014; Ilan, 2013; Sandberg, 2008; Sandberg and Pedersen, 2011; Shammas and Sandberg, 2016). Drawing on Bourdieu’s three metaphors of (social, economic and cultural) capital we can see how all of these can and are being mobilised by youth on road, in the hope of gaining advancement both in the street field and wider social space. The article has also integrated sociological literature relating to the destabilisation of the habitus into more criminological applications of Bourdieu’s concepts, which tend to view it as more enduring and limited.

This set of understandings demonstrates the highly aspirant nature of street affected youth in the UK and the tremendous creative energy they have mobilised in order to individually and collectively attempt to renegotiate their terms of inclusion. Understanding youth agency in this way could provide important insight into youth intervention and desistance strategies, which could seek to harness the productive energy of the ‘street’ creating pathways to possibility for this highly aspirant generation.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers whose generous feedback aided in the development of this article. In a similar vein I would also like to acknowledge Drs Aaron Winter, Mohammad Rahman, Nathan Kerrigan, Lambros Fatsis and Rhys Sandow, who at various points in the development of the article offered encouragement and insight.

## Funding

The study this article is drawn from was funded as part of an ESRC 1+3 doctoral studentship.

## ORCID iD

Yusef Bakkali  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7296-2485>

## References

- Abrahams J and Ingram N (2013) The chameleon habitus: Exploring local students' negotiations of multiple fields. *Sociological Research Online* 18(4): 213–226.
- Anderson E (1999) *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. New York: WW Norton & Company.
- Bakkali Y (2018) *Life on road: Symbolic struggle & the mumpain*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Sussex.
- Bakkali Y (2019) Dying to live: Youth violence and the mumpain. *The Sociological Review* 67(6): 1317–1332.
- Blumer H (1954) What is wrong with social theory? *American Sociological Review* 19(1): 3–10.
- Bourdieu P (1979) Symbolic power. *Critique of Anthropology* 4(13–14): 77–85.
- Bourdieu P (1986) The forms of capital. In: Richardson J (ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, pp. 241–258.
- Bourdieu P (1993) *Sociology in Question*. London: Sage.
- Bourdieu P (1999) The contradictions of inheritance. In: Bourdieu P et al. (eds) *Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 507–514.
- Bourdieu P (2000) *Pascalian Meditations*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu P (2020) *Habitus and Field: General Sociology Vol. 2 (1982–82)*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu P and Wacquant LJ (1992) *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bowen GA (2006) Grounded theory and sensitizing concepts. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5(3): 12–23.
- Contreras R (2015) Recalling to life: Understanding stickup kids through insider qualitative research. In: Miller J and Palacios W (eds) *Advances in Criminological Theory*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 155–168.
- Corbin JM and Strauss A (1990) Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology* 13(1): 3–21.
- Fatsis L (2019) Policing the beats: The criminalisation of UK drill and grime music by the London Metropolitan Police. *The Sociological Review* 67(6): 1300–1316.
- Fraser A (2015) *Urban Legends: Gang Identity in the Post-Industrial City*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gilroy P (1993) *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London and New York: Verso.
- Glynn M (2014) *Black Men, Invisibility, and Desistance from Crime: Towards a Critical Race Theory from Crime*. London: Routledge.
- Gunter A (2008) Growing up bad: Black youth, 'road' culture and badness in an East London neighbourhood. *Crime, Media, Culture* 4(3): 349–366.
- Gunter A (2010) *Growing Up Bad?: Black Youth, 'Road' Culture and Badness in an East London Neighbourhood*. London: Tufnell Press.
- Gunter A and Watt P (2009) Grafting, going to college and working on road: Youth transitions and cultures in an East London neighbourhood. *Journal of Youth Studies* 12(5): 515–529.
- Hallsworth S (2013) *The Gang and Beyond: Interpreting Violent Street Worlds*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hallsworth S and Silverstone D (2009) 'That's life innit': A British perspective on guns, crime and social order. *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 9(3): 359–377.
- Hancock L and Mooney G (2013) 'Welfare ghettos' and the 'broken society': Territorial stigmatization in the contemporary UK. *Housing, Theory and Society* 30(1): 46–64.

- Harding S (2014) *The Street Casino: Survival in the Violent Street Gang*. Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Heyl BS (2001) Ethnographic interviewing. In: Atkinson P, Coffey A, Delamont S, Lofland J and Lofland L (eds) *Handbook of Ethnography*. London: Sage, pp. 369–383.
- Hudson R (2013) Thinking through the relationships between legal and illegal activities and economies: Spaces, flows and pathways. *Journal of Economic Geography* 14(4): 775–795.
- Ilan J (2013) Street social capital in the liquid city. *Ethnography* 14(1): 3–24.
- Ilan J (2015) *Understanding Street Culture: Poverty, Crime, Youth and Cool*. Basingstoke: Macmillan International Higher Education.
- Inghilleri M (2005) Mediating zones of uncertainty: Interpreter agency, the interpreting habitus and political asylum adjudication. *The Translator* 11(1): 69–85.
- Ingram N (2011) Within school and beyond the gate: The complexities of being educationally successful and working class. *Sociology* 45(2): 287–302.
- Oppenheim M (2018) Puma criticised for holding party featuring fake crack house. *The Independent*, Available at: [www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/puma-house-of-hustle-council-estate-drug-dealing-party-fake-crack-house-a8301321.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/puma-house-of-hustle-council-estate-drug-dealing-party-fake-crack-house-a8301321.html) (accessed 9 September 2019).
- Patton M (1990) *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*. London: Sage.
- Pinkney C and Robinson-Edwards S (2018) Gangs, music and the mediatiation of crime: Expressions, violations and validations. *Safer Communities* 17(2): 103–118.
- Rahman M (2019) *Homicide and Organised Crime: Ethnographic Narratives of Serious Violence in the Criminal Underworld*. London: Palgrave.
- Reay D, Crozier G and Clayton J (2009) ‘Strangers in paradise’? Working-class students in elite universities. *Sociology* 43(6): 1103–1121.
- Reid E (2017) *‘On road’ culture in context: Masculinities, religion, and ‘trapping’ in inner city London*. Doctoral dissertation, Brunel University London.
- Robinson G, McLean R and Densley J (2019) Working county lines: Child criminal exploitation and illicit drug dealing in Glasgow and Merseyside. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 63(5): 694–711.
- Sandberg S (2008) Black drug dealers in a white welfare state: Cannabis dealing and street capital in Norway. *The British Journal of Criminology* 48(5): 604–619.
- Sandberg S and Fleetwood J (2017) Street talk and Bourdieusian criminology: Bringing narrative to field theory. *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 17(4): 365–381.
- Sandberg S and Pedersen W (2011) *Street Capital: Black Cannabis Dealers in a White Welfare State*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Shammas VL and Sandberg S (2016) Habitus, capital, and conflict: Bringing Bourdieusian field theory to criminology. *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 16(2): 195–213.
- Silva EB (2016) Unity and fragmentation of the habitus. *The Sociological Review* 64(1): 166–183.
- Spohrer K (2016) Negotiating and contesting ‘success’: Discourses of aspiration in a UK secondary school. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 37(3): 411–425.
- Stuart F (2020) *Ballad of the Bullet: Gangs, Drill Music, and the Power of Online Infamy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- White J (2017) *Urban Music and Entrepreneurship: Beats, Rhymes and Young People’s Enterprise*. Abingdon: Taylor & Francis.

### Author biography

Yusef Bakkali is a Legacy in Action Fellow at De Montfort University. Growing up in Brixton, south London, from an early age Yusef became aware of injustice and inequality operating in society. As he traversed education and later academia, Yusef found sociology could equip him with a language to diagnose and challenge social problems affecting himself and the community.

Consequently, Yusef has developed a research and teaching praxis focused around social justice and change. He hopes to encourage students to develop critical skills, developing fresh perspectives to aid them in tackling the challenges, both of today and the future.

### Résumé

Dans cet article, je m'intéresse aux applications existantes de la théorie bourdieusienne (*habitus*, champ et capitaux) appliquée aux environnements de «la rue». J'appelle à reconnaître les stratégies développées par ceux qui participent à la vie de la rue, une variante britannique de la culture de la rue, pour mobiliser le capital du «champ de la rue» et ainsi faciliter les échanges dans des champs/espaces sociaux moins subordonnés. À partir des trois métaphores de Bourdieu du capital social, économique et culturel, l'article illustre comment ces formes de capital peuvent être et sont mobilisées par les jeunes qui participent à des situations de «rue» (dans la rue), dans l'espoir de progresser dans les espaces de la rue et au-delà. Cette optique contraste avec certaines réflexions criminologiques qui tendent à se concentrer de manière «restrictive» sur les aspects criminogènes de la vie des hommes marginalisés, sans parfois saisir dans toute son ampleur la capacité d'action et d'expression de ceux qui éprouvent les systèmes de valeurs de la rue et/ou y participent, ainsi que les luttes plus générales qui ont lieu autour de la valeur qu'ils créent.

### Mots-clés

Bourdieu, capital de la rue, *habitus*, musique rap

### Resumen

Este artículo aborda las aplicaciones existentes de la teoría de Bourdieu (*habitus*, campo y capitales), llevada a entornos 'callejeros'. Se aboga por el reconocimiento de las estrategias desarrolladas por aquellos involucrados en la vida de la calle, una variante de la cultura callejera del Reino Unido, para movilizar el capital del 'campo de la calle' con el fin de facilitar los intercambios en campos / espacios sociales menos subordinados. A partir de las tres metáforas de Bourdieu del capital social, económico y cultural, este artículo ilustra las vías a través de las cuales estas formas de capital pueden ser y están siendo movilizadas por los jóvenes que participan en entornos de 'calle' (de la calle), con la esperanza de avanzar en los espacios de la calle y más allá. Esto contrasta con algunos enfoques criminológicos que tienden a aplicar una perspectiva 'estrecha' centrada en los aspectos criminológicos de la vida de los hombres marginados, echando en falta a veces la completa gama de agencia y expresión de aquellos que se ven afectados por y/o involucrados en sistemas de valores de la calle, así como las luchas más amplias sobre el valor que crean.

### Palabras clave

Bourdieu, capital de calle, *habitus*, música rap