

Hysteresis in Recent Sociological Research

Abstract

This paper reviews work using and developing the concept of hysteresis in recent sociology. Hysteresis, as introduced in Bourdieu's work, refers to the tendency for people to resist change, even when their circumstances change. Hysteresis can occur when people's habitus—their embodied dispositions—no longer align with their current social conditions. Hysteresis can lead to social conflict and inequality, anomie, alienation, and anxiety, as well as to social movements for change. The paper reviews a burgeoning interdisciplinary literature, maturing within the last decade or so, examining hysteresis in different ideal-typical contexts across various national cases: People moving to new environments and environments changing while people remain in place, with this last dynamic happening at either the societal or organizational level. We close by outlining some promising pathways for future work.

As argued by Bourdieu (1972/1977, p. 78), the hysteresis effect occurs when a person's environment changes rapidly while their habitus remains adjusted to their old environment. In a recent paper, Strand and Lizardo (2017) point out that hysteresis remains undertheorized in sociology even though other Bourdieusian concepts—such as field, capital, and habitus—have been theorized heavily. Strand and Lizardo (2017) note that hysteresis is typically accompanied by reflexivity, wherein actors react to the mismatch between their habitus and the environment with increased deliberation and self-awareness. Their habitus may change after actors engage in reflexivity. Because hysteresis allows for reflexivity, it can shed light on “habitus in motion,” so actors may verbalize what usually goes without saying, with tacit dispositions becoming more observable and directly researchable (Hanckel et al., 2021, p. 267). Studying hysteresis can also help us understand how actors navigate courses of action during “unsettled times” (Ayala-Hurtado, 2022).

Hysteresis occurs when the habitus and environment become mismatched, and it has been observed in two ways: a person moves to a new, different background or remains in place while the environment changes. In the following sections, we review recent work on hysteresis, focusing on these two general conditions under which the phenomenon can be observed across various settings.

People Moving to New Environments

The first type of habitus-environment mismatch arises when someone moves to a new environment, and their habitus cannot rapidly adapt. As a result, the environment remains the same while people move to different locations. Recent work on this variety of habitus-environment mismatch focuses particularly on geographic and social mobility.

Migration

Migration is a process that is bound to lead to hysteresis, especially when the host country is radically different from the origin country. Migrants may experience hysteresis upon arriving in a host country as their habitus is adjusted to the environment of their home country. For instance, Chen (2022), Xie and Reay (2020), and Xu (2017) consider how attending school in a new country or a new setting within the same country can introduce hysteresis in academic and cultural fields.

Chen (2022) examines hysteresis experienced by Chinese college students who migrate *within* mainland China from rural villages to universities located in urban areas. Focusing on four cohorts (the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s) of students who grew up in rural areas of Shandong province, Chen finds rural students experience systematic patterns of subjective dislocation, especially when it comes to adapting to the more liberal, “do it yourself” aspect of college education at top universities. Rural students face their new environment endowed with an academic habitus forged by reliance on an explicit academic meritocratic ranking system tied to publicly posted grades while relying on guidance from respected authority figures for their major life decisions. In college, these habits misfire, as students are now expected to make crucial decisions independently, and academic performance has a looser connection to ultimate career success. As a result, most rural students stick to their old habits, doing more academic work than necessary to earn the requisite grades while sacrificing time that middle-class urban students use for extracurriculars, cultural consumption, informal sociability, and the construction of valuable network connections. Regarding decision-making, absent authority figures to guide them, most rural students report “going with the flow” provided by the existing calendar of classes and requirements but lack an ultimate end goal where their efforts may lead them.

Xie and Reay (2020) study the same population as Chen (2020)—rural students in mainland China who migrate to urban areas to study at elite universities—and come to similar conclusions. Using data from a sample including rural and non-rural students from four elite Chinese universities, Xie and Reay find that rural students are more likely to experience hysteresis regarding *social* adaptation to the new milieu. While rural students do as well academically as their non-rural counterparts, they encounter trouble integrating into the University's social life (e.g., participating in student clubs and extracurricular activities). The study habits acquired in rigorous rural high schools help them excel academically in their new environment. However, feelings of being a stranger in a new land, lack of social confidence, and feelings of social inadequacy create a mismatch between their existing social skills, linguistic habits, and styles of self-presentation and the new environment. As a result, rural students double down on their academic pursuits but under-invest in accumulating social and cultural capital and network-building strategies.

Xu (2017) examines the hysteresis effect experienced by Mainland Chinese (MLC) students who attend university in Hong Kong, using interview data obtained from thirty-one participants (twenty-five undergraduates) attending a “top English-medium research-intensive university in Hong Kong” (p. 612). All participants in the study were top-scoring MLC students in the *gaokao* (the national university entrance exam) who forewent opportunities to attend elite mainland universities. According to Xu, given its unique colonial history, the higher education field in Hong Kong and its attendant universities constitute a field distinct from that of higher education institutions in mainland China. Thus, it is impossible for MLC students who come to Hong Kong to study to experience that border crossing without a significant “dislocation of subjectivity” (Martin, 2003).

Xu (2017) finds that top-scoring students from mainland China are at once attracted by the international cachet and prestige of Higher Education Institutions in Hong Kong but at the same time experience hysteresis because they expect the social organization of schooling and the messages transmitted to students in the Hong Kong context to be similar to those of prestigious institutions on the mainland. However, they encounter systematic differences, thwarting their practical expectations. For instance, while on the mainland, they would be the cream of the crop, in Hong Kong, they are just one out of many other high-achieving groups. In the same way, while a degree from one of the top two mainland universities is a surefire ticket to continuing advancement and career prospects, the value of a Hong Kong degree is more ambiguous and fungible, requiring more work on their part to make it count. MLC students thus experience “allodoxia”—literally “alienation from belief” (see Bourdieu, 1979/1984, p. 155)—or a sense of betrayed expectations whereby the objective value of the degree they obtained in Hong Kong in the relevant symbolic and economic markets fails to match their expectations. They thus struggle to adapt their pre-existing habits to the specific configuration of the higher-education field in Hong Kong.

Social Mobility

Social mobility may also lead to hysteresis. In this case, a change in environment arises not from a geographical move but from mobility in the social space (Bourdieu, 1989). Moreover, these changes may co-occur; as we saw, Xie and Reay (2020) study hysteresis resulting from geographical *and* social mobility.

Friedman (2016) looks at the cognitive and affective dimensions of the experience of social mobility through the lens of hysteresis. The basic argument is that socially mobile individuals will likely end up with a “split habitus,” composed of preservative habits from their

class of origins clashing against later acquired dispositions from their destination class. Friedman draws on interview data from a sample of upward *and* downwardly mobile respondents in Great Britain based on comparing their current and parents' occupations. Friedman finds that, among the upwardly mobile, those who had moved up the class ranks more gradually—a minority of upwardly mobile respondents—experienced minimal hysteresis, being able to adjust their previous habits to their new class rank at each step. However, and consistent with the idea of hysteresis, upwardly mobile respondents who experienced relatively sudden, sometimes staggered, shifts in class status had more disruptive experiences, with old habits clashing against new settings and circumstances, a phenomenon Friedman (2016, p. 138ff) refers to as “moments of hysteresis.” On the other hand, the most upwardly mobile respondents experienced hysteresis as an enduring, regular feature of their life, with decisive consequences for how they viewed themselves, others, and remaining contacts from their class of origin.

Environmental Change with People Staying in Place

The second type of habitus-environment mismatch is when the habitus remains the same, but the environment changes. Scholars have applied hysteresis to understand environmental change at societal and organizational levels. In the first case, macroeconomic changes make previously typical life trajectories less achievable. In contrast, alternative, usually less desirable, trajectories become more attainable. In the second case, meso-level organizational transformations make previous habits challenging to enact in new school or workplace conditions.

Societal Level

Ayala-Hurtado (2022), for example, uses hysteresis to explain the mismatch between

aspirations for stable employment and widespread precarity during a recession. They interviewed young people in Spain who graduated from university soon after the 2008 financial crisis. As the interviewees were raised during economic prosperity, their habitus remained adjusted to a time when financial stability was more likely. Thus, when asked to describe their professional future, they envision themselves working hard and eventually becoming stably employed. Ayala-Hurtado (2022) shows that hysteresis applies to future projections; they can be based on past rather than present conditions.

Au (2023) studies how college graduates cope with the decreasing potential to exchange their degrees for economic capital. Using semi-structured interviews with twenty Hong Kong residents with at least a bachelor's degree from a foreign university, Au finds that foreign degree holders do not easily secure jobs in Hong Kong after graduation. Au (2023) notes the increased financial precarity and wage stagnation in East Asia; interviewees describe the declining value of a foreign degree compared to their parent's generation and express shock at being unable to leverage their degree for economic capital in Hong Kong (again, a form of "allodoxia"). However, they adopt a new perspective on the value of their degree, instead focusing on the cultural capital they gain despite the decline in convertibility into economic prosperity. Many interviewees note how their degree affords them diverse experiences and increased knowledge of foreign cultures.

Roenn-Smidt et al. (2020) compare reactions to a changing healthcare system among relatives of stroke patients. After a long period of maintaining a welfare-based healthcare system, Denmark implemented austerity measures, which shifted more care responsibilities from healthcare providers to patients' relatives. Roenn-Smidt et al. use ethnographic and interview data from a three-year study, finding that relatives raised during the welfare system are frustrated

by the changes, as they expect high-quality healthcare in exchange for high taxes. On the other hand, foreign-born relatives—not raised in a welfare system—are unfazed, as their habitus leads them to expect to care for their family members during hospitalization. Those with the means to do so reluctantly adapt by purchasing necessary medical equipment or recruiting family members to sit by their relative’s bedside. However, “difficult” relatives make their frustrations known and refuse to adapt.

Organizational Level

Sudden, unexpected changes in workplaces and neighborhoods also lead to hysteresis. Changes to structure and management practices within a workplace can result in employees experiencing hysteresis. Workers’ structural position in their workplace can affect their reactions to such changes. Those who experience hysteresis balance resisting new changes while maintaining survival within their workplace. In addition, changes to the landscape of a neighborhood or an influx of new residents can also lead to hysteresis.

Dirk and Gelderblom (2017) study how Afrikaner academics react to post-Apartheid changes in higher education. They conducted thirty-one semi-structured interviews with faculty and lecturers at a South African university. Historically, the university existed to promote Afrikaner—Dutch settlers in South Africa—nationalism amidst fears that the Black population would stifle White civilization. They find that post-Apartheid, following national efforts, the university’s new dean rejects Afrikaner nationalism, tasking younger faculty with leading the change. Older Afrikaner faculty members resist, recognizing their declining dominance within the university, but cannot re-adapt their habits and practical beliefs to the changing conditions. They deliberately speak only in the Afrikaner language and refuse to implement the recommended curriculum changes, claiming they do not align with their values. In this way, the

older academics, facing a change that devalues their position within the university, double down on past practices (Strand and Lizardo, 2017).

Hanckel et al. (2021) use hysteresis to understand how school health interventions act on the bodies of educators. They study primary schools in London that implement “The Daily Mile” program, where teachers take students out on a daily fifteen-minute run. Administrators incorporate body shape, gender, class position, and job status when passing judgment on teachers’ participation in the run. They think of credentialed teachers (primarily White and middle class) as lazy if they do not run with the students. By contrast, they expect teaching assistants (mostly working-class people of color) *not* to run and congratulate them on the occasion they do. Due to their belief that White teachers are more likely to exercise than non-White teaching assistants, administrators expect assistants to experience hysteresis and expect teachers not to.

Kirschner and Lachiotte (2001) studied how clinicians at a community mental health center react to a mandated change in care delivery. In the new regime, clinicians have to deal with stricter protocols for diagnosing and treating patients, resulting in more paperwork, often to the patient's detriment. Using seven months of ethnographic work, Kirschner and Lachiotte find that some clinicians practice “resistance” by adapting the new rules to their existing habits; others practice “survival” by adapting their current habits to the new regulations. Resistant clinicians find loopholes in the new protocol or even wholly reject it to make treatment cheaper for their patients.

McDonough and Polzer (2012) find differences among responses to introducing private-sector management practices in the public sector. Using survey and interview data of front-line service workers in Toronto, they distinguish between the reactions of “inside”

employees (mostly female librarians, nurses, and caseworkers) and “outside” employees (mostly male manual laborers). Inside employees respond to the changes by working harder than ever to meet clients’ needs but struggle to keep up with the increased workload. On the other hand, outside employees express frustration at losing personal connection with their manager and find little fulfillment and pride in their day-to-day work.

Similarly, Koll (2021) finds that workers respond differently to their company transitioning from a state-owned to a privately owned entity, depending on their job title. They conduct a six-month ethnography of a Nordic telecommunications company 25 years after privatization, marking a shift in its goals from serving the public good to maximizing shareholder value. Technicians, low in the company's hierarchy, experience frustration with increased surveillance and rules. Practices that enabled them to be good employees in the past no longer apply. Shop stewards (elected leaders within the workers’ labor union) shift between a technician and a management habitus. On the one hand, they acknowledge that privatization has radically changed the nature of their work, but they also see these changes as legitimate and economically necessary.

Kerr and Robinson (2009) also study how workers react to changes within a company, but look at the years following the decline of the Soviet Union. Taking jobs within a Ukrainian company between 1998 and 2001, they used “participant objectivation” (see Bourdieu, 2003) and ethnography. In the years following the fall of the Soviet Union, the company put a heavier emphasis on corporate aims. They rewarded employees who appeared to embrace the new organizational goals and punished those who did not. During the Soviet era, some employees were discreetly critical of the Soviet Union and skillfully escaped punishment for their dissent against the regime. As they possessed this “dissident habitus,” they successfully portrayed

themselves as loyal employees at the company and did not experience a mismatch between their habitus and the new field. Those indifferent to Soviet ideology or raised after the Soviet era risked being accused of not being committed to the company. As they never needed to practice proving their devotion to the Soviet Union, their habitus did not prepare them to display loyalty to the company.

Neighborhood Level

Ivanou and Flores (2018) also study the post-Soviet context, focusing on routes to neighborhood activism among those raised during the Soviet era. Using semi-structured interviews and participant observation with activists, Ivanou and Flores study protests against environmentally harmful construction in a neighborhood of Moscow. After the fall of the Soviet Union, people became concerned with the commodification of previously publicly owned land, especially in their communities. Many young people subscribed to the Soviet ideal of valuing the collective good over individual gain. Because of this, they experienced a mismatch between their moral disposition and the conditions of their neighborhood. After experiencing hysteresis, they reflexively radicalized (see Strand & Lizardo, 2017), mobilizing against harmful construction with their neighbors. Rather than looking to the past, they do not advocate for a return to the Soviet era but a new, *democratic* society that also values the collective good.

Cornelissen (2022) uses hysteresis to examine long-term residents' clinging to perceptions of their neighborhoods in the past and contrast this with new residents' aspirational perceptions of the community. Using data from a three-year-long ethnographic project, Cornelissen shows how longtime residents of a Northwest Detroit neighborhood practiced a practical residence style characterized by vigilance against violence, a habitus in tune with the neighborhood's past conditions, which were undergoing rapid change. This practical disposition

toward caution and wariness against violence remained even as crime rates dropped, and the community was transformed by increasing gentrification for middle-class white newcomers, buying up cheap homes, and planting urban gardens.

Discussion

Strand and Lizardo (2017: 179) suggest that some form of reflexivity typically accompanies hysteresis. They develop four modalities of reflexiveness after hysteresis: *radical*, *anomic*, *traditional*, and *ironic*. Radical reflexiveness happens when a strong order of succession is present, and actors reject their old practical beliefs while embracing new beliefs that better explain their situation. Anomic reflexiveness is when actors' actions are not shaped by belief; there is a weak order of succession, and they reject their old practical beliefs, unable to form new beliefs. Traditional reflexiveness refers to when actors double down on their old practical belief despite its mismatch with the environment; an order of succession is absent, there is a strong effect of old practical belief, and there is a lack of new belief. Finally, ironic reflexiveness refers to the 'degree zero' of the dimensions; old belief is there but not strong, the absence of new belief has a partial effect, and there is a recognizable order of succession, but the effect is not strong. Within the literature we have considered, scholarship has mainly focused on traditional and ironic reflexiveness.

In existing scholarship, traditional reflexiveness occurs when workers react to the restructuring of their workplace. For instance, Dirk and Gelderblom (2017) find that older faculty at a historically Afrikaner university in South Africa reject requests from the administration to make their teaching more inclusive of other ethnic and cultural backgrounds and continue to teach their courses with unamended curricula. Also, workers in non-managerial

positions tend to have traditional reflexivity to the corporatization or privatization of their workplace. They “double down,” believing their working conditions were better pre-privatization or pre-corporatization. Some find loopholes in the new system to ensure that their clients (patients, students) receive quality service as before ((Courtney, 2017; Kirschner & Lachicotte, 2001), while others reject the increased surveillance and pressure to be productive (Koll, 2021; McDonough & Polzer, 2012). Similarly, relatives of patients become frustrated with the quality of care that their relatives receive through corporatized healthcare, holding firmly to the belief that care should remain the same as before (Roenn-Smidt et al., 2020).

Ironic reflexiveness is the most studied form in the recently emerging hysteresis literature. This work shows that not all outcomes associated with hysteresis are deleterious or distressing. Scholars have examined how hysteresis allows actors to creatively navigate their environments using their old and new beliefs. For example, Domaneschi (2018) considers how immigrants cope with hysteresis by melding their home and host country cultures to create new meanings of cultural objects. Matsunaga et al. (2021) show how international students leverage hysteresis to improve their academic performance in an unfamiliar learning environment.

Other scholars observe that some actors who experience changes in their environment do not resist and adapt well, though their peers may react differently (Friedman, 2016; Hanckel et al., 2021; Harris & Wise, 2012; Kerr & Robinson, 2009; Koll, 2021; McDonough & Polzer, 2012) A possible explanation could be that they were already equipped with the habitus needed to adapt to their new environment, suggesting that they did not experience hysteresis. Finally, another group of scholars considers how actors react to changes in their professional or academic trajectory, and when they do this, they may feel guilty about becoming successful or have unrealistic aspirations for the future despite differences in their trajectory (Ayala-Hurtado, 2022;

Cornelissen, 2022; Crawford & McKee, 2018; Friedman, 2016; Xu, 2017).

Anomic reflexivity has been primarily observed in the context of schooling. Scholars mainly study how students in unfamiliar learning environments become depressed or anxious when their habitus does not help them determine the best course of action in their learning situation ((Chen, 2022). Furthermore, anxiety related to increasingly competitive job markets and skyrocketing student loan debts have been proposed as an effect of hysteresis in education (Cant, 2018). Finally, radical reflexivity has been observed by Alam (2021), Nilan (2017), and Ivanou and Flores (2018), who interviewed environmental and community activists in Indonesia and Russia, respectively. They find that activists experience hysteresis due to a mismatch between their values and previous experiences and changes to their neighborhood, including changes to the local ecology brought about by privatization and environmental degradation (in Nilan's and Alam's cases). In Ivanou and Flores's case, after experiencing hysteresis, activists mobilized around blocking the changes and envisioning an entirely *new* organization of Russian society.

Existing Gaps in the Literature

While the literature on the hysteresis effect in sociology is rapidly growing, it remains relatively small. Accordingly, there are naturally many unexplored substantive areas and methods. These include applications to social movements, the COVID-19 pandemic, the oppression of social groups, and the use of non-qualitative methods.

Regarding modalities of reflexivity, radical reflexivity has been studied very little (but see Ivanou & Flores, 2018; Nilan, 2017; Alam, 2021). Social movements seem like the environment in which radical reflexivity should be more likely to be observed, but hysteresis is rarely discussed in this context. Other Bourdieusian concepts, such as habitus and field, are

used to study social movements (Crossley, 2003; Mayrl, 2013). These studies mainly consider how social movements actively attempt to foster new habitus but need more insight into how hysteresis interacts with this process (Haluza-DeLay, 2008). Telesiene and Gross (2016) discuss how having specific religious values may contribute to participating in a social movement but need to observe actors rejecting their old habits and embracing new ones. It may be worthwhile to investigate how the degree to which alternative beliefs have been codified and developed affects the likelihood of actors adopting them during a period of reflexivity.

Further, except for Alam and Hoon (2021), there needs to be more scholarship in sociology empirically investigating how the Covid-19 pandemic introduced hysteresis. Alam and Hoon look at how the pandemic impacts students' learning. In addition to disrupting education, the pandemic also affected the nature and stability of work; because of this, some scholars have called for the need to study how it modified work and expectations for the future (Ayala-Hurtado, 2022; Graham, 2020). As existing scholarship shows, people react differently even if they experience similar environmental changes (McDonough & Polzer, 2012). When do workers resist increased precarity, and when do they adapt?

Shaw (2021) outlines a model of cognition of social rupture, which theorizes that once practical consciousness fails in a situation, actors shift to discursive consciousness, and the "taken-for-grantedness" of a schema degrades, decreasing the utility of the schema. She proposes that this model can be applied to understanding the oppression of nondominant social groups and points out that oppression on its own does not necessitate resistance from a non-dominant group (Shaw 2021: 16). Oppression and lack of resources can introduce anomic reflexivity (Strand & Lizardo, 2017). It may be fruitful to apply the concept of hysteresis to understand how a period of turbulence may or may not lead to radical reflexivity among non-dominant groups.

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