

# The history of the bourdieus sociology sociology essay



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Pierre Bourdieu was born in France in 1930 and died in 2002. He is well known for his works in the field of Sociology, Anthropology and Philosophy. He is best known for his theory of class distinction, which he theorised in his book “ Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste”. Another theory he worked on was the theory of power and practice, where he dealt with subjects such as “ Symbolic power” and “ habitus”.[1]

In Bourdieu’s view, agency and structure constantly sustain power, which is created within a culture and can become symbolic. This happens due to what he refers to as “ habitus”. Habitus represents the norms and rules of society which are used to control people’s behaviour and way of thinking. Habitus is ‘ the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them’ (Navarro, 2006).

Society is the one that creates habitus. The patterns developed can be transferred from a context to another and they change given different circumstances or a different period of time. Habitus ‘ is not fixed or permanent, and can be changed under unexpected situations or over a long historical period’ (Navarro, 2006).

Free will and structures interact and give rise to habitus. There is no need for conscious thought or “ deliberate pursuit of coherence”.

In addition to “ habitus”, Bourdieu talked about the concept of “ fields”.

These refer to several social or institutional networks where people can interact with others, thus showing their different kinds of capital and

expressing their dispositions. Networks can be represented by relationships

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formed among people, relationships based on similarities such as: religion, education, culture. Power is not experienced in the same way in all environments; this means that the context a person is in has a big influence on habitus. Different contexts have an influence on the way people react to power. While a person could not be affected by power in one field, the same person could see it as a challenge in a different one.

Bourdieu also talked about a concept he called “ capital”. He elaborated on three types of capital, which go beyond material assets: cultural capital, symbolic capital and social capital.

These concepts were presented in Bourdieu’s book “ Distinction” where he argued that society maintains its order by following the rules of language, values, education, thinking or activities. These norms that people follow lead them to accept without thinking the differences present in society, the hierarchies made and the social inequality surrounding them.

The three elements: habitus, capital and field play a central role in Bourdieu’s theory of Practice. These interact with each other forming the actions of people. A person’s dispositions, or habitus, her capital and the fields in which she operates form her action repertoire.

Social capital is one of the forms of capital mentioned by Bourdieu in his theories. It can refer to the networks of friends a person has, to the networks of the family or acquaintances or even of contacts. Social capital brings benefits to a person by exerting preferential treatment towards in group members.

Bourdieu's economic capital refers to the material possessions of a person, for instance money and property. Having a low economic capital implies not having as many possessions or chances to afford high priced affairs. A high economic capital means a person owns more material possessions and is able to afford luxurious things. However, having a high economic capital does not mean a person is considered from a higher class. What Bourdieu suggests is that economic capital only combined with cultural capital forms the hierarchy of classes.

Cultural capital plays an important role in the hierarchy of society. It is used by higher classes as a way to distinguish themselves from lower classes. It is a form of domination that is not based on economic domination. Instead, taste is the primary weapon of differentiation. Focusing on taste preferences instead of material assets became a method to hide inequality while still maintaining a well-defined line between lower and higher classes.

Cultural capital is formed by the cultural knowledge and goods a person possesses. This form of capital includes artistic preferences and taste, educational background, aesthetic taste in fashion or furniture, as well as many others. Bourdieu's theory of distinction states that cultural capital is represented by: cultivated disposition, which can be verbal facility, the way in which a person expresses herself in a conversation, but it can also be body posture, manners and general behaviour. Other representatives of cultural capital can be material objects that require specialised knowledge to appreciate, such as sculptures or old pieces of art which are not well-known by the general population. In addition to these, he argues that cultural capital is institutionalised, which refers to the educational background of a <https://assignbuster.com/the-history-of-the-bourdieu-sociology-sociology-essay/>

person. Attending a high ranked University is usually evidence of a higher level of cultural knowledge.

Symbolic capital is closely related to cultural capital and symbolic forms and it refers to recognised legitimation by the society. The place a person occupies in society and the way society responds to that becomes symbolic capital. Being recognised as an influential or knowledgeable person offers one a high symbolic capital. It becomes a source of power which can be used by its holder. When this power is utilised by someone, that person exercised symbolic violence. Symbolic violence represents the imposition of a certain way of thinking upon another person. It imposes social order because it is embedded in people's unconscious, making them follow the dominant or superior person's way of thinking.

Bourdieu argues that social origin and cultural capital are the most important. He claims that although social and economic capital are indeed acquired as time passes, both of them depend on the social origins and cultural knowledge of a person.

Another topic Bourdieu elaborated on was Social Illusion. He saw reality as being constituted from a number of roles people follow. Everyone engages and follows their own path in life, similar to how a character from a book follows the storyline. The rules and norms society follows add a sense of reality and help the formation of the social illusion. Like a fictional character, a human being has a "beginning"- his birth, and an "end"-his death. The beginning is associated with someone's cause, reason to be there while the end reminds of his purpose, the role he managed to play. Bourdieu called

this sequence of events “biographical illusion”. There are some attributes that contour the created illusion. The symbolic power of the state supports these attributes by giving people dates of birth, citizen numbers, grouping them based on nationalities and sex. People often compare life to a story that is being written as time passes. They see it as a journey in which decisions guide the outcome of the narration.

Bourdieu constructed his theories based on real life circumstances that intrigued him. This means the theories can be tested by others as well, by applying them to a personal context. An example of social networks I am part of would constitute my participation in the Rotaract club. This allowed me to interact with other peers, have conversations in which we exchanged knowledge but which also allowed people to show their cultural capital. Being part of the club requires one to pass through a process of admission, which means that it is necessary for one to possess a certain amount of capital to enter. Once in, how you express your dispositions becomes one of the things other members notice first about you. The norms, or habitus, of the group can soon be observed as being different from the patterns developed in other circumstances. These patterns are assimilated by new members in an unconscious way and create a new way of thinking for that person. The objective experiences one has become subjective, interpreted in different ways by everyone.

This social network, or field, constitutes one part of my social capital. In addition to this network, being part of a class in high-school, maintaining a group of friends or even being part of my family is considered a part of my social capital. Similar to my capital, is the social capital of one of my friends.  
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However, attending a different school, being part of a different family and having a different group of friends influences the amount of benefits he could gain from being part of a network. Our systems of dispositions might indeed be similar at a superficial level, given that we both come from the same class, in the same society. However, our acquired schemes of thought and perception differ at a deeper level. Institutional education as well as family education influences the most profound cognitive interactions. I received an education focused on science, which gave me a different way to view the world compared to him, whose education was based on art and music.

Little differences come from our economic capital. Comparing all of our possessions would lead to the conclusion that the only difference is him owning some musical instruments. However, the value of these instruments, an acoustic and an electrical guitar, does not put him in a different societal class. The differences in hierarchy, as Bourdieu argued, come from the quality and amount of knowledge one possesses, which form our cultural capital. Taste in food, art, music and literature are good indicators of class. Appreciating exotic food is something in common for both me and my friend. The differences would surface when comparing artistic and musical knowledge. I, for instance, cannot read music; neither can I play any instruments. But, playing the guitar is not an indicator of higher class. Uncommon, more difficult ones, like piano or violin, are the ones that make the true hierarchy distinctions.

Yet, one cannot say that cultural and economic capital are not

interconnected. For example, if cultural capital is institutionalized, meaning a <https://assignbuster.com/the-history-of-the-bourdieu-sociology-sociology-essay/>

high ranked university plays a role in defining the hierarchies, a high economic capital is also needed to be able to afford attending the said institution. Moreover, symbolic capital could also surface from this interaction. The majority of society views high ranking universities as something out of their touch, thus, they offer respect and power to people who got in. Having prestige and power usually means being part of more groups, having more interactions with people. This implies that one's social capital is higher.

In conclusion, Bourdieu's theories covered most of the components of society. These components interact and form subsystems which, glued together, give rise to the unified society. Social illusion gives people reason and a story to continue. With the use of all different forms of capital, people draw boundaries between them, differentiate themselves from the crowd. But still, society maintains the control through habitus, the norms everyone follows unconsciously. And given that humans are social creatures, they need to interact; Bourdieu presented the fields, which represents the subsystem that allows people to express themselves, to show their dispositions and continue playing their role.