

## Pierre Bourdieu’s Cultural Capital Theory: Key Concepts

Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory first appears in *Distinctions* (1984), his study on how the **cultural practices** of individuals from one class in society distinguish them from those in another.<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu surveys the cultural consumption of participants from the three strata of 1960s French society—working, middle and upper class—and identified patterns in their cultural preferences.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, Bourdieu does not define “culture” and thus his use of the term remains contested. Bourdieu examines how the education system reinforces and reproduces class inequality, as it advantages students who are from homes that have the cultural resources, or capital, to be successful at school. He identifies three forms of cultural capital: embodied, objectified, and institutional (Bourdieu 1986).

- **Embodied** forms of cultural capital are intangible and unquantifiable, and include an individual’s practices, general disposition, skills and knowledge, and accent.
- **Objectified** cultural capital refers to the possession of a material object that is acceptable to dominant agents within a social space (Bourdieu 1986).
- **Institutional** cultural capital refers to credentials, such as qualifications awarded by educational institutions.<sup>3</sup>

Bourdieu classifies cultural practices, such as reading and writing, under the embodied form of cultural capital, and posits that all three forms of capital can be inherited and accumulated. Reading is also associated with objectified and institutional forms of cultural capital because

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<sup>1</sup> The book was first published in French in 1979 as *La Distinction, Critique Sociale du Jugement* but was only translated into English in 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Bourdieu surveyed cultural practices such as reading, cinema viewing, theatre and concert attendance, mass media consumption habits, choice of recreational activities, and style and food preferences. See Bourdieu (1984, 525-545) for statistical data.

<sup>3</sup> See Bourdieu 1986.

reading requires material (books or devices) and individuals can only obtain a recognised education qualification if they have demonstrated a certain level of reading competency.

Bourdieu argues that the legitimisation or disavowal of specific cultural practices is played out in a **field**, a social universe with its own logic (Bourdieu 1993a, 163). A cultural resource or practice only has value and can be converted into a form of capital if it is recognised by others in the field.<sup>4</sup> This field can be visualised as a football pitch populated by players who are social agents (individuals) and both formal and informal institutions. As on a football pitch, each social universe involves a unique set of players and each are equipped with different level of skills and knowledge (their cultural capital) which informs their dispositions. Each player occupies different positions in the field and only those who know the rules or “logic of the field” can take part in the game; those with more knowledge of the game are in more advantageous positions. Newcomers to the field must familiarise themselves with that social universe before they can successfully play the game, and any advantage within a field is dependent on what specific cultural capital an individual possesses. He observes that those who earn their cultural capital differ from those who inherit it because of the imperceptible ways in which class manifests itself (1984, 110), such as through one’s manner and accent or in one’s choice of cultural and general lifestyle practices.

Cultural preferences play a role in the class conditioning of an individual who is then in possession of **habitus**, or a set of dispositions, which shapes their actions (Bourdieu 1990, 53).<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu posits that individual and group habitus dictate play within a field and thus social agents do not move within any social space in a “random way” (1984, 110). Bourdieu likens such external factors to a magnetic field because these forces, which are beyond the control of **agents**, constrain

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<sup>4</sup> The other types of capital that Bourdieu identifies are economic and social capital.

<sup>5</sup> Habitus is the Latin word for hexis, a term used by Aristotle to describe ethical or intellectual virtue, and is an acquired ability, skill, habit or incorporated disposition which makes people act in ways and is something that is borne from practice (Eikeland 2008, 53).

actions within the field (1984, 241).<sup>6</sup> He defines an individual’s tastes as “manifested preferences” (Bourdieu 1984, 56) and argues that dominant groups assign cultural capital to their practices by disavowing the preferences of those lower in the social hierarchy. He argues that “it is no accident that when [tastes] have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes” (Bourdieu 1984, 56).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, he asserts that cultural practices are not as innocent as they first seem, as taste “classifies the classifier” (Bourdieu 1984, 6). Bourdieu states that while “taste” implies choice, many individuals who are from the dominated classes do not have this freedom of opportunity as they lack both the economic and cultural capital required to access the lifestyles valued by the dominant class (1984, 179-179).<sup>8</sup>

Bourdieu draws attention to the complicit role educational institutions play in maintaining class distinctions through the sanctioning of the “hereditary transmission of cultural capital” (Bourdieu 1986, 243). Those who do not come from homes in possession of cultural capital, but who have the financial means, can still access costly cultural pursuits valued by the school system, such as attending the theatre or buying books they are likely to study in school (Bourdieu 1984, 122). Rejecting essentialist ideas about intelligence, Bourdieu argues that tests that measure cognitive ability, such as the Stanford-Binet IQ test, advantage those who are in possession of significant amounts of cultural capital. Students who are from lower-socioeconomic groups do not possess the level of cultural and linguistic competency (embodied cultural capital) recognised by

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<sup>6</sup> Bourdieu’s argument can also be likened to Newton’s law of inertia in that Bourdieu believes that shifts in an individual’s life trajectory only occurs when when acted upon by external forces. For Bourdieu, these are both fortunate or unfortunate events such as finding a benefactor or the outbreak of war respectively (Bourdieu 1984, 110).

<sup>7</sup> There are similarities between Bourdieu’s work and nineteenth-century economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen’s 1899 treatise *Theory of the Leisure Class* (Trigg 2001). Veblen, like Bourdieu, argues that people distinguish themselves from others though their lifestyle choices. Veblen posits that each class in society feels pressure to copy the class practices of those higher up on the hierarchy through the consumptions of goods and leisure activities that are most distanced from work (Veblen 1899, 85).

school systems and as a result, do not do as well in these tests. Bourdieu labels this disadvantaging practice “IQ Racism” (1993b, 177-178).<sup>9</sup> In administering these types of tests, schools enable and commit **symbolic violence**—a term he uses to describe the visceral rejection of specific cultural practices, and arbitrarily privilege cultural practices that are familiar to and benefit the dominant group in society (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, 5). Cultural practices that are condemned as too familiar or easily accessible to the mainstream population are generally marginalised within elite institutions. For example, Bourdieu points out that easy-listening music and accessible forms of writing hold little value in the economy of practices and so are disparaged as vulgar, childish, primitive, frivolous, shallow, superficial, or meretricious (Bourdieu 1984, 486).

Within the education field, **critics of Bourdieu’s theory** point out that Bourdieu is too deterministic and that his notion of habitus leaves little to individual agency (Connell 1987, 94).<sup>10</sup> However, Bourdieu argues that habitus does not “govern practices along the paths of mechanical determinism” but that it generates “thoughts perceptions, expressions, and actions” that are limited by historically and socially situated conditions (Bourdieu 1990, 55). In other words, he believed that it would be naïve to believe that “traces of life” exist within a vacuum (Bourdieu 1990, 55). Cultural capital theory has also been accused of being too vague, dated, and lacking in empirical evidence (Sullivan 2002; Goldthorpe 2007). British sociologist John Goldthorpe (2007, 12) believes that Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital is no longer pertinent to contemporary society because it predates the expansion of education systems that have facilitated upward mobility. Goldthorpe’s critique, however, fails to recognise that Bourdieu’s argument is in fact that the

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<sup>9</sup> The term “IQ racism” is used by Bourdieu to indicate that those who practice this form of discrimination essentialise people the way racists do. It must also be noted here that Bourdieu’s experiences during the Algerian war for independence in the 1950s influenced all his subsequent work. See Bourdieu 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Terry Lovell (2000) outlines critiques of Bourdieusian theory in feminist studies, but also highlights the ways cultural capital theory has been used by feminist scholars in studies on class and gender.

opening-up of centralised school systems that has compounded, rather than reduced, social inequalities (Calhoun 2006, 1409).<sup>11</sup> Researchers from different fields have used Bourdieusian theory to explain and explore how individuals and institutions, or agents, act relationally within a social space.<sup>12</sup>

**[(habitus) (capital) + field] = practice.**<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Distinctions* (Bourdieu 1984) was written during the period of education reforms in France. Education reforms in 1963 which saw the establishment of three streams of secondary schooling: classical, modern and practical, and later classical-modern, technical and vocational (Resnik 2007, 156-157).

<sup>12</sup> Bourdieu’s fundamental concepts have been used in of fields as diverse as accounting and finance (Malsch et al. 2011), translation studies (Inghillieri 2005) and health (Cockerham 2005). For more examples of how Bourdieu is used outside of education, view delegates’ abstracts from the Bourdieu Study Group’s inaugural conference also (British Sociology Association 2016). John Guillory (1994) points out the relative value of cultural capital in his critical analysis of the role education systems play in forming and reinforcing the Western literary canon, a set of literary works that are valued above other works.

<sup>13</sup> Bourdieu’s expression of cultural capital theory (1984, 101).

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