

# Delving into Pierre Bourdieu's Thought Habitus, Social Capital, and Symbolic Power

Sulistyaningsih<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> SMPN 2 DOKO KAB. BLITAR, Indonesia; [sulismimin@gmail.com](mailto:sulismimin@gmail.com)

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## Abstract

Pierre Bourdieu, a prominent French sociologist, developed a theory that explores how social structures and power dynamics work through concepts such as habitus, social capital, and symbolic power. Habitus refers to the system of habits and dispositions that shape how individuals interact with their social world, influenced by life experiences and socialization. Social capital refers to the resources that can be accessed through social networks, which serve as a means to gain advantages in social and economic life. Symbolic power, meanwhile, is an invisible form of power that operates through symbols and social norms that shape people's perceptions of value and status. This article explores Bourdieu's theories with the aim of providing a deeper understanding of how social inequality is maintained through habitus, social capital, and symbolic power. The analysis shows how these concepts interact to influence individuals' positions in society, and how they maintain or challenge existing power structures. Through this approach, this article seeks to uncover the ways in which power operates in contemporary society.

## Keywords

Habitus, Social Capital, Symbolic Power, Pierre Bourdieu, Social Inequality



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## INTRODUCTION

Pierre Bourdieu is one of the most influential sociologists of the 20th century whose contributions to understanding the dynamics of power and social structure through concepts such as habitus, social capital, and symbolic power have changed the way we view social relations and inequality.[1]–[3] In his works, Bourdieu introduced ideas that highlighted how individuals act within larger social frameworks and how social inequalities can be maintained through seemingly invisible social mechanisms that have a profound impact on everyday life. Habitus, which refers to the habits and dispositions formed through life experiences, guides individuals in making decisions and interacting in society. Social capital, on the other hand, speaks to the network of social relationships that individuals can access to gain resources or advantages.

Symbolic power, a more abstract concept, refers to the ways in which symbols, values, and norms shape societal views of legitimacy and status. This article aims to explore how these three concepts relate to and influence social structures, and how they help maintain or dismantle existing power structures.

## **METHODS**

The method used in this study is the library method, namely by collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing literature relevant to Pierre Bourdieu's theories, especially regarding the concepts of habitus, social capital, and symbolic power.[4] This study utilizes Bourdieu's books and scientific articles that review the development and application of these theories in a broader social context. The analysis process includes identifying the main arguments in the literature that examine the relationship between the three concepts and their implications for social structure and power. This study also includes a critical examination of the application of Bourdieu's concepts in modern society, as well as an understanding of how this theory is used to analyze social inequality and power practices in various fields, such as education, economics, and culture. The literature used includes Bourdieu's classic works as well as contemporary articles that develop and apply his ideas in global and local contexts.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Findings**

Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, has left an indelible mark on the social sciences with his groundbreaking work on the dynamics of power and social structures. Central to Bourdieu's theories are the concepts of habitus, social capital, and symbolic power, which have become fundamental tools for understanding how individuals navigate their social worlds and how power is distributed and maintained within society. Bourdieu's ideas challenge traditional understandings of class, culture, and power, offering new ways to analyze how social inequalities are perpetuated across generations.

This article explores Bourdieu's thought in-depth, focusing on three key concepts: habitus, social capital, and symbolic power.[5]–[7] By examining the interrelations of these concepts, we aim to uncover how they contribute to our understanding of social behavior, inequality, and the reproduction of power in modern society. This analysis will also highlight how Bourdieu's framework offers insight into the ways individuals and groups position themselves within complex social systems, and how they both influence and are influenced by broader social structures.

## **Discussion**

Habitus, one of Bourdieu's most influential concepts, refers to the deeply ingrained habits, dispositions, and ways of thinking that individuals develop through their life experiences, particularly through early socialization. It is a set of cognitive and behavioral patterns that shape how individuals perceive the world and how they act in it.[8] Habitus is not a rigid structure but a dynamic system that adapts to new situations while maintaining its core principles. It reflects both individual history and collective social experiences, acting as a bridge between personal action and broader social forces.

Habitus is formed primarily through the early years of socialization, where individuals are introduced to the norms, values, and expectations of their particular social context. This process is heavily influenced by family, school, and other key institutions that help shape an individual's worldview and behavior. For instance, children raised in affluent families may develop a habitus that reflects confidence in navigating elite institutions, while those raised in working-class environments may internalize more practical, everyday dispositions.

Habitus, therefore, is not something that individuals consciously construct but rather something that is instilled in them through repetitive practices and social interactions. It works in tandem with the larger social structure to shape people's tastes, practices, and social aspirations. The habitus of an individual can include everything from their preferences in food and fashion to how they speak, move, and interact in social settings.

Bourdieu argues that habitus plays a central role in the reproduction of social inequality. Because habitus is deeply ingrained and often unconscious, individuals act in ways that perpetuate the social structures in which they were socialized. For example, a person from a working-class background may not aspire to the same career opportunities as someone from a more privileged background, not because they are incapable, but because their habitus has shaped their understanding of what is possible or appropriate. In this way, habitus contributes to the maintenance of social hierarchies, ensuring that individuals remain within the bounds of their social class or group.

Habitus, in Bourdieu's terms, is a tool for understanding the persistence of social inequalities over time. It acts as a filter through which individuals interpret the world and make decisions, and it is within this framework that social norms and cultural capital are transmitted across generations.

Social capital, another central concept in Bourdieu's work, refers to the resources individuals can access through their social networks. These resources can take various forms, including material benefits (such as jobs or financial support) as well as intangible benefits (such as social status or influence). Social capital is built upon the relationships individuals have with others in their social circles, including family, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances.

Bourdieu emphasizes that social networks are crucial for individuals to succeed within society. Social capital is not equally distributed among all individuals, and those with more extensive and influential networks are able to leverage these connections for personal, professional, and social gain. For example, a person who has strong ties with influential political or business figures may have greater access to opportunities than someone without these connections, even if they have similar qualifications or skills.

However, social capital is not just about the number of connections an individual has but also the quality and relevance of these connections. The ability to navigate networks and gain access to important resources is shaped by one's habitus. For instance, an individual with a habitus aligned with the elite cultural and social norms may have an easier time establishing influential relationships in high society.

Bourdieu argues that social capital contributes to the reproduction of social inequalities. The resources available through social networks are not equally accessible to all individuals, and individuals from privileged backgrounds are often able to tap into these resources more easily than those from marginalized or working-class backgrounds. In this sense, social capital functions as a form of power that can be used to maintain social stratification.

Social capital is inherited and cultivated through socialization. The habitus that individuals develop in early life influences their ability to create and maintain beneficial social networks. Children born into families with high social capital are more likely to build their own networks and perpetuate their family's privileged position in society.

Symbolic power is one of Bourdieu's most original and impactful contributions to sociology. Unlike traditional forms of power, which are based on direct control or coercion, symbolic power operates through subtle, often invisible, means. It is the power to define reality, shape perceptions, and influence social norms and values. Symbolic power is exercised through symbols such as language, culture, and rituals that create and maintain hierarchies of value and meaning in society.

Symbolic power is closely tied to the concept of symbolic capital, which refers to the status, prestige, and recognition that individuals or groups gain through cultural accomplishments or associations. Symbolic capital is not a tangible resource but operates through the perception of others. For example, a person's reputation, their ability to be seen as an authority in a particular field, or their association with prestigious institutions are all forms of symbolic capital.

Bourdieu argues that those who control symbolic capital are able to maintain their social and economic power. This is particularly evident in fields such as education, art, and media, where access to recognition and legitimacy often depends on one's ability to navigate symbolic systems. For example, a professor at a prestigious university may have more symbolic capital than an equally qualified individual teaching at a lesser-known institution, regardless of the actual knowledge or expertise they possess.

Symbolic power is a form of social control, as it shapes how individuals and groups understand their place in society. It influences what is considered legitimate or valuable, and through this process, it reinforces existing power structures. The ability to define what is "normal" or "acceptable" in society is a key tool in maintaining control and ensuring the dominance of particular groups or ideologies.

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power also ties into the idea of social institutions as gatekeepers. Institutions such as the state, schools, and the media play a significant role in distributing symbolic power by determining what knowledge, culture, and values are considered legitimate. Those who control these institutions wield significant power in shaping public perceptions and maintaining their social dominance.

Bourdieu's key concepts habitus, social capital, and symbolic power are deeply interconnected. Habitus shapes how individuals perceive and interact with the world, which in turn influences how they can accumulate social capital. Social capital, through access to valuable networks and resources, provides individuals with opportunities to gain symbolic power, which reinforces their social position. Together, these concepts explain how individuals navigate and reproduce social structures and inequalities.

For example, an individual with a habitus that aligns with elite cultural norms may find it easier to access influential networks (social capital) and, as a result, gain symbolic capital through recognition in prestigious circles. Over time, this reinforces their social position and perpetuates the existing power dynamics.

## CONCLUSION

Pierre Bourdieu's theories of habitus, social capital, and symbolic power provide a powerful framework for understanding the reproduction of social inequality and the subtle dynamics of power in society. His work reveals how social structures are not simply imposed from above but are actively reproduced through everyday practices and interactions. The concepts of habitus and social capital show how individuals' actions and opportunities are shaped by their social origins, while symbolic power highlights the ways in which dominance is maintained through the control of cultural and social norms. Bourdieu's ideas continue to be highly influential in contemporary sociology, offering a lens through which we can better understand how power operates in both visible and hidden ways. By acknowledging the complexity of social behavior and the various forms of capital individuals draw upon, we gain a deeper insight into the ongoing reproduction of social hierarchies and the role of culture in maintaining or challenging these systems.

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