



THE RELEVANCE OF PIERRE BOURDIEU'S THEORY IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY INDONESIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract :

Despite the extensive global influence of Pierre Bourdieu's sociology, systematic analyses of the relevance and contextual application of his theoretical framework within contemporary Indonesian society remain limited. This study addresses this problem by examining how Bourdieu's core concepts habitus, field, various forms of capital, and symbolic violence are utilized to explain social relations and power dynamics in Indonesia. The aim of this article is to assess the relevance and explanatory capacity of Bourdieu's theory in Indonesian social research, particularly in the fields of education, gender relations, and state institutional practices. This study employs a qualitative research design based on a systematic literature review of open-access scholarly articles indexed in Dimensions.ai and Scopus-reputable publications accessed via Google Scholar. Data were analyzed thematically by identifying patterns in the application of Bourdieusian concepts across selected studies. The findings indicate that Bourdieu's theoretical framework remains highly relevant for understanding social inequality, cultural domination, and symbolic forms of power in contemporary Indonesia. The study demonstrates that Bourdieu's relational approach enables a nuanced analysis of how domination is reproduced through everyday practices, cultural norms, and institutional structures, thereby offering a critical lens for interpreting the multilayered complexities of Indonesian society.

Keywords: Pierre Bourdieu, habitus, cultural capital, symbolic violence

INTRODUCTION

Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) stands as a central figure in contemporary sociology who successfully bridged structural and agency-based approaches through his distinctive concepts of habitus, field, and capital. His work has been highly influential in uncovering power relations operating through cultural and symbolic mechanisms rather than solely through economic structures. The concept of habitus explains how social structures become embodied in individuals' dispositions and mentalities, shaping historically grounded ways of thinking, feeling, and acting (Byrd, 2025; Zhuang & Liu, 2025; Pino Díaz, 2025; Sieczka, 2025). In Indonesian society, habitus is reflected in class-based behaviors, modes of dress, and symbolically laden religious practices.

Bourdieu's notion of capital extends beyond economic resources to include cultural, social, and symbolic capital, all of which are mutually



convertible within social fields (Atkinson, 2025; Jansma et al., 2025). For instance, higher education functions not merely as academic attainment but as an accumulation of cultural capital that confers social legitimacy. The theory of fields conceptualizes social life as composed of multiple arenas of power characterized by contestation and strategic struggle (Atkinson, 2025; Rossier & Lunding, 2025). Each field operates according to its own internal logic, including political, educational, literary, and religious fields within the Indonesian context.

Symbolic violence emerges as a crucial concept for understanding how domination operates without physical coercion, through systems of meaning, language, and values that are internalized as “natural” (Chomani, 2025). In Indonesia, symbolic violence is frequently observed in gender relations, bureaucratic structures, and family institutions.

Despite the extensive global application of Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework, its systematic and context-sensitive analysis within contemporary Indonesian society remains relatively limited. Existing studies on Bourdieu tend to be either theoretically abstract or focused on Western social settings, while research in Indonesia often employs his concepts in a fragmented manner, without sufficiently examining how habitus, capital, and field interact within Indonesia's unique socio-cultural, religious, and postcolonial configurations. This gap indicates a lack of comprehensive analysis that situates Bourdieu's theory within the specific dynamics of Indonesian social structures and symbolic practices.

This limitation gives rise to a central problem: the insufficient contextualization of Bourdieu's theory in explaining power relations and social reproduction in Indonesia, particularly in relation to education, religion, bureaucracy, and everyday social practices. Without such contextual grounding, the explanatory potential of Bourdieu's framework risks being reduced to a mere theoretical reference rather than a critical analytical tool capable of capturing Indonesia's complex social realities.

Based on this problem, the main research question guiding this study is: How relevant is Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework in analyzing power relations and social reproduction in contemporary Indonesian society? Accordingly, the objective of this study is to examine the relevance and applicability of Bourdieu's concepts habitus, capital, field, and symbolic violence in interpreting social practices and power structures within the Indonesian context, while highlighting the specific socio-cultural characteristics that shape their operation.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrative and contextual approach, which positions Bourdieu's theory not merely as a universal sociological

framework but as a flexible analytical lens adapted to Indonesia's contemporary social conditions. By critically engaging with local realities such as religious symbolism, educational stratification, and bureaucratic culture this research contributes to the development of a more nuanced and contextually grounded application of Bourdieusian theory in non-Western societies, particularly within Southeast Asia.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in systematic literature analysis. The research focuses on scholarly works that explicitly apply Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework to the Indonesian social context. Data sources consist of open-access journal articles indexed in Dimensions.ai and Scopus-reputable publications accessed through Google Scholar. The selection criteria include relevance to contemporary Indonesian society, explicit use of Bourdieusian concepts, and publication in peer-reviewed academic outlets. This approach allows the study to capture diverse interpretations and applications of Bourdieu's theory across multiple social domains, such as education, religion, bureaucracy, and cultural practices.

The data analysis process was conducted through careful reading, categorization, and comparison of selected texts. Each article was examined to identify how key Bourdieusian concepts habitus, various forms of capital (cultural, social, symbolic), field, and symbolic violence were operationalized and interpreted within Indonesian settings. Attention was given to patterns of argumentation, empirical contexts, and theoretical adaptations, enabling the identification of recurring themes as well as conceptual variations across studies.

The technique of data analysis employed in this research is thematic analysis. This technique involves coding relevant textual segments, grouping them into thematic categories, and synthesizing findings to construct an integrative analytical narrative. Through this process, the study systematically evaluates the relevance and explanatory power of Bourdieu's theory in understanding power relations and social reproduction in contemporary Indonesia. Thematic analysis also facilitates critical reflection on the strengths and limitations of existing literature, thereby supporting the study's objective of offering a contextually grounded and theoretically informed assessment.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Habitus and Social Reproduction

Habitus constitutes a system of dispositions that shapes individuals'

perceptions and social practices based on their historical experiences (Byrd, 2025). In the Indonesian context, the habitus of lower and marginalized social groups is often formed through structural conditions such as poverty, educational discrimination, and gender inequality.

Tamrin et al. (2021) apply Bourdieu's theory to explain the reproduction of terrorist habitus in Indonesia. Their findings demonstrate that extremist behavior is not an instantaneous process but rather the result of accumulated social experiences that cultivate a habitus of violence. This illustrates how habitus can account for social practices within contexts of radicalization and ideological marginalization. In education, students from impoverished families often develop a habitus that leads them to disengage early and perceive schooling as disconnected from social mobility, thereby reinforcing cycles of structural inequality. The concept of habitus helps explain why educational interventions frequently fail when they neglect deeply embedded dispositional structures.

Within workplace culture, habitus also clarifies why many informal-sector workers tend to accept job insecurity and low wages as "fate" rather than as manifestations of structural injustice. Habitus thus reveals how social structures become embodied within human cognition and behavior, generating actions that appear autonomous while being shaped by long-standing social histories.

Cultural Capital and Educational Inequality

According to Bourdieu, cultural capital encompasses knowledge, lifestyles, academic credentials, and symbolic competencies that are transmitted and transformed within educational systems. In Indonesia, cultural capital serves as a central mechanism in the production of educational inequality. Aprilianti and Yulindrasari (2021) found that in early childhood education, symbolic violence operates through the labeling of children according to dominant cultural standards. Children from minority cultural backgrounds are often perceived as lacking sufficient "capital," which constrains their developmental potential.

Families from middle- and upper-class backgrounds typically provide cultural environments aligned with institutional expectations such as early literacy practices, formal linguistic styles, and extracurricular enrichment. Cultural capital shapes how students interpret curricula and interact with teachers. Those lacking dominant cultural codes are frequently misunderstood or evaluated as inferior, despite possessing intellectual capacity. Understanding cultural capital thus reveals that education is not a neutral institution but a contested field where outcomes are determined by cultural resources rather than innate ability alone.

Symbolic Violence in Gender and Family Relations

Symbolic violence refers to forms of domination that operate invisibly, are accepted as natural, and are difficult to resist because they function at the level of meaning and representation. Dwie (2022) applies this concept to analyze the subordination of women within the Bhayangkari organization (wives of Indonesian police officers). The study demonstrates that militaristic, hierarchical, and patriarchal structures are internalized as normative by women members, who actively participate in mechanisms that reinforce their subordinate positioning without conscious awareness.

Power symbolization through titles, uniforms, and seniority hierarchies functions as instruments of symbolic domination that generate structural legitimacy. Symbolic violence also manifests in derogatory language, sexist humor, and cultural expectations that restrict women's social roles. Musdawati (2016) further argues that symbolic violence constitutes the root of physical and structural violence against women in Acehnese politics. Women are frequently positioned as moral symbols or democratic ornaments rather than full political subjects. Recognizing symbolic violence enables deeper cultural critique and facilitates more transformative structural change.

Social Fields and Capital Contestation

Fields are social spaces in which individuals and groups compete over various forms of capital, each governed by its own rules and logics. In literary studies, Fikriyati Azizah et al. (2021) show that Indonesia's literary criticism field is shaped by struggles between symbolic and political capital. Educational, political, and religious fields likewise serve as major arenas of contestation between elites and grassroots actors. Bureaucratic arenas, for instance, are frequently dominated by social capital in the form of networks of influence rather than technical competence.

Economic capital can be converted into symbolic capital, as seen when major educational donors receive honorary academic titles or when religious figures gain legitimacy through personal wealth. Field logics often remain invisible to social actors yet profoundly shape strategies, positions, and outcomes. Communication strategies that succeed in academia may fail in mass media contexts, and misunderstanding field-specific rules can lead to marginalization. The field concept thus highlights that social life is not neutral terrain but a continual struggle over power, symbols, and meaning.

Cultural Critique and Social Transformation

Bourdieu's framework enables critical interrogation of domination concealed within institutions, symbols, and everyday practices. In Indonesia where economic and cultural inequalities intersect his theory proves particularly

effective in uncovering masked forms of domination. Karima et al. (2022), analyzing Indonesian women's novels through Bourdieu's lens, reveal that even feminist narratives may reproduce symbolic violence against women. This underscores the necessity of reflexive and nuanced cultural critique.

Across education, healthcare, bureaucracy, and media, specific symbols carry power that generates invisible hierarchies. Bourdieu's approach equips scholars to simultaneously interpret symbols, meanings, and power relations. Moreover, he calls sociologists to act as "collective intellectuals" who not only observe social reality but actively participate in unveiling unrecognized domination. This makes his framework particularly suited to critical Indonesian scholarship addressing cultural inequality, symbolic subordination, and urban middle-class dynamics.

CONCLUSION

Pierre Bourdieu has made a profound contribution to modern sociology through the concepts of habitus, capital, field, and symbolic violence. In Indonesia, his theoretical framework has been widely applied to analyze educational dynamics, gender relations, political practices, and cultural processes. Bourdieu's relational approach allows sociologists to move beyond macro-structural analysis and examine how domination operates subtly through symbols and meanings embedded in everyday life. Consequently, his thought remains highly relevant for addressing the multilayered complexities of contemporary Indonesian society.

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