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Key Assumptions in the work of Pierre Bourdieu

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The key assumption of Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological framework is that there is an underlying structure to all social life. The framework is constructed from extensively concepts such as social fields, field of power, position, habitus, disposition, practice, capital, symbolic violence, and social reproduction. The main argument that links the concepts together avers that social fields are performing stages or arenas where people make judgments, negotiate, and struggle for valuable resources and outcomes in which they take interest. Individuals, institutions, and other agents try to distinguish themselves from others in order to deploy or acquire the types of capital that are deemed useful or valuable, and confer strength and power to the holders within that social field.

The conceptual framework provides a degree of objectification by abstracting individuals into strategic players on a defined but imaginary space, or social field. Thus, the social field of any group or institution is conceptually structured and embodied by people according to principles of differentiation that are based on the distribution of characteristics that are relevant to it. In this case, key characteristics or properties include educational level, disciplinary background, affiliations and alliances, productivity, research quality, social and cultural competencies, and all other advantages that would carry weight in the field at a specific point in time.

At the same time, the framework recognizes the interdependencies of even the most autonomous social fields by acknowledging the actual participation, or intrusion, of players from the fields of power of the parent society or via the semiconscious structuring of positions in a pattern homologous to those dominant or in ascendancy in any given culture. In the case of an academic journal which I study, the fields of power assumed to be dominant and potentially intrusive are those of the department, the university administration, and of the discipline, on up through societal demands of higher education to which the journal must answer. External intrusions rack a field’s internal arrangements and disturb relations, values and reward systems, requiring defense, resistance, and adjustments whether feigned or real.
The aim of the framework is to understand, by analogy, social fields and the positions in them as well as the internal arrangements set up by the players as they establish goals and make judgments about what is desirable and valuable to them. The framework serves the researcher in conceptualizing positions, tracing the struggles and compromises about value, and understanding conversions of the different kinds of capital circulating in related social fields at specific times. These tracings assist systematic observation and enhance the ability of the researcher to assess more objectively and completely the relations and activities of all the players involved, not just the dominant ones. Patterns of exchange traced over time reveal objectives, values, and preferences shared by the field that may otherwise not be observable by the researcher. Relations and patterns suggested by this type of sociological analysis can then be more easily checked against the interactions and dynamics suggested by primary and secondary sources.