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Symbolic Violence

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Before discussing Pierre Bourdieu's *symbolic violence*, it is first necessary to sketch an outline of his sociology. While symbolic violence has been treated as a theory in its own right (Bourdieu, 1997, 1991; Swartz, 1997), it finds a better fit as a theoretical concept within Bourdieu's better known, larger cultural theory of action in which one develops a *habitus* (an internalized set of dispositions) on a field of struggle (a network that constitutes the distribution of capital and power). The field is where individuals, situated according to habitus, attempt to acquire and mobilize various forms of capital. Bourdieu (1986) generally treats four types of capital: *economic* (money and property), *cultural or informational* (cultural goods and services), *social* (friendships, acquaintances, and social networks), and *symbolic*.

Symbolic capital is different from the other forms in that it accrues from them, and it provides the means to legitimate the exercise of power. When one accumulates sufficient economic, cultural, and social capital, one can set the rules of the game. Further, symbolic capital (or symbolic power—Bourdieu uses the terms interchangeably) is a key ingredient of symbolic systems, which perform three distinct yet interrelated functions: cognition, communication/social integration, and social differentiation. First, symbolic systems are “structuring structures” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 164–165). As such, they exercise a cognitive function in that different modes of knowledge structure different ways of apprehending the world. For instance, the scientist may understand the world very differently than the humanist. Symbolic systems also constitute “structured structures” (pp. 164–166) whereby deep structures of meaning are shared by all members of a culture and dictate what is possible to know or do within that culture. Bourdieu argues that these “structured structures” provide not only instruments of knowledge but also instruments of

communication. Thus, in facilitating communication, symbolic systems exercise a function of social integration. Finally, symbolic systems serve as instruments of domination. Through knowledge and communication, a dominant symbolic system integrates all the members within that system, establishes a hierarchical order for less dominant systems, and legitimizes the distinctions of social rankings by the "fictitious integration of society as a whole" (p. 167). This integration Bourdieu calls symbolic violence.

For Bourdieu, the exercise of power almost always entails some form of legitimation. This legitimation comes in the form of symbolic violence, which is the imposition of symbolic systems on groups such that the imposition is disguised and taken for granted. Symbolic systems exercise symbolic power "only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it" (164). As such, symbolic violence is hegemonic in that dominated groups accept as legitimate the condition of their domination: it "is the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 167). However, Bourdieu makes clear that it does not constitute a Gramscian form of hegemony because it does not involve the negotiated construction of ideological consensus.

Legitimation of the social order is not... the product of a deliberate and purposive action of propaganda or symbolic imposition; it results... from the fact that agents apply to the objective structures of the social world structures of perception and appreciation which are issued out of these very structures and which tend to picture the world as evident. (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 21)

As such, symbolic violence is not necessarily imposed from above.

Social agents are knowing agents who, even when they are subjected to determinisms, contribute to producing the efficacy of that which determines them insofar as they structure what determines them. And it is always in the "fit" between determinants and the categories of perception that constitute them as such that the effect of domination arises. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 167-168)

To this end, as social agents reproduce their social worlds, they also reproduce their own domination.

The capacity to impose the "legitimate vision of the social world and... its divisions" constitutes what Bourdieu (1987) calls worldmaking power, which rests on the concept of misrecognition. In order for an exercise of power to be recognized as legitimate, it must first be misrecognized as disinterested. "Activities and resources gain in symbolic power, or legitimacy, to the extent that they become separated from underlying material interests and hence go misrecognized as representing disinterested forms of activities and resources" (Swartz, 1997, p. 90). Bourdieu (1990) noted that "even 'economic' capital cannot act unless it succeeds in being recognized through a conversion that can render unrecognizable the true principle of its efficacy" (p. 118). In other words, legitimacy obtains through a misrecognition of the logic of interest as the logic of disinterest.

As a theoretical perspective, symbolic violence has rarely been used in IB research (one example is Joyce 2003). Why, then, is it important for such research? First, it has the potential to provide novel insights into information behaviors and the social discourses that elicit such behaviors. By gaining an understanding of the nature of symbolic systems and how they are imposed on groups, one may come to have a better understanding of how individuals' information needs are produced in the first place. Further, symbolic violence as a concept can be operationalized in service of other theories to produce insights into, for example, the role it plays in social positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), the strategies and tactics of resistance employed against it (Certeau, 1984), and how it helps to sustain a normative existence in a life lived in the round (Chatman, 1999).

Second, no one is immune to symbolic violence. As such, we can examine the impact of symbolic violence on librarians and how such impact affects access, collections, and services. If, as Bourdieu argues, all action is interested but the exercise of world-making power is misrecognized as disinterested, then one might well ask just how balanced library collections are. Such examination may have great appeal for activist librarians and critical researchers alike. Indeed, while Bourdieu focused much of his work on the production of symbolic power, he viewed his sociology as a tool in the struggle against various forms of symbolic violence.

Third, symbolic violence, in conjunction with Bourdieu's *oeuvre* as a whole, can help to provide a metatheory or worldview within which the researcher can place his or her work. Virtually all science is carried out with a particular if implicit worldview. Because scientists are aware of the underlying assumptions, the worldview need not be articulated. On the other hand, social science often employs theories and methods that stem from disparate worldviews the underlying assumptions of which do not go without saying. Symbolic violence can help provide a metatheoretical framework within which researchers can situate their work, and it can be linked to and extended by other theoretical perspectives such as, for example, Habermas's theory of communicative action, Giddens's structuration theory, or the tenets of social constructionism.

The methodological approaches associated with symbolic violence can be either quantitative or qualitative. While Bourdieu's own methods often leaned to the quantitative, Joyce (2003) used purely qualitative methods to examine emergent interpretative repertoires to see how symbolic violence and the acquisition of informational capital mediate the coming out process in gay youth. Either way, however, symbolic violence is best used with research that has a critical edge. Critical research strives to expose social flaws and promote actions that would help eliminate those flaws (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 35). Further, critical research is self-reflexive, and this is particularly important because if, as Bourdieu argues, symbolic violence applies to all forms of symbolic representations, then how can one practice social science, itself a symbolic enterprise, without reproducing the effects of social distinctions? Bourdieu's answer is a call for the "reflexive practice" of sociology (Bourdieu & Waquant, 1992). "Every sociological inquiry requires a simultaneous critical reflection on the intellectual and social conditions that make the inquiry possible. If sociology is the science of social conditions determining human practices, it must also be the science of social conditions determining intellectual practices, including sociology" (Swartz, 1997, p. 270). Indeed, the incorporation of symbolic violence into one's worldview, or its employment as either concept or theory, requires a level of reflexivity that can only improve the quality of research.

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