



Application of Bourdieu's Conceptual Triad in Pakistani context Ambreen Shahriar

Abstract: *The conceptual triad of Pierre Bourdieu is discussed in easier and simpler way for novice readers of Bourdieu in this paper. His concepts of habitus, field and capital are discussed in detail along with the relevant concepts like power struggle between agents', dominant and dominated agents and field of production and the field of consumption. Following which, a brief over view of the research work done by researchers in various fields of studies using Bourdieu's framework is given in a separate section. Before conclusion, a contextual reference from Pakistan is provided in a section, with special reference to my PhD research in that context, in which I plan to apply Bourdieu.*

Key words: *conceptual triad of Pierre Bourdieu, habitus, field, capital, power struggle between agents'*

‘All social life is essentially practical. All the mysteries which lead theory towards mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.’

Introduction

Jenkins (1992, p. 68) quotes the above words of Karl Marx (Bottomore and Rubel, 1963, p. 84, the quotation is Thesis VIII) and mentions these words of Marx to be almost that of Bourdieu. He mentions that Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* and other works inspired Bourdieu and ‘encouraged (italics from the original source) him to express his thought.’

This paper will be focusing Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Practice. I am looking forward at applying the same on Pakistani context in my PhD research, which I will discuss in a later section. Bourdieu's framework helps

understand some important issues raised and discussed in my PhD research, which focus along with other things the role played by familial and social backgrounds of the young people on making them what they are. This question cannot be better discussed but under Bourdieu's conceptual triad which is discussed in detail here, followed by a brief overview of scholars who used Bourdieu's framework in their work. By the end I am providing some contextual references from my PhD research conducted in Pakistan which will help apply Bourdieu to such a distinct and distant context.

Critical Review

Bourdieu's sociological position

Classical and contemporary sociological theories aim at discussing the primacy of structure or agency; with structuralists (Saussure, 2002), Marxists (Marx and Engels, 1848), functionalists (Durkheim, 1893) declaring social structures to be responsible for individual actions; and methodological individualists (Weber, 1968), social phenomenologists (Husserl, 1900/1901), interactionists (Mead, 1934) and ethnomethodologists (Garfinkel, 1967) stressing the capacity of individual agents for constructing and reconstructing the social worlds. However, Bourdieu's theoretical framework is a complex drawing on the ideas of Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Merleau-Ponty. Bourdieu (1977, 1990a) attempted to balance structure and agency, as complementary forces; with understanding human behaviours as capable of transforming the existing structure, and social structures as affecting human behaviour. This balance between structure and agency is evident in the lives of my participants as well. The following sections will discuss the theory of Bourdieu in detail.

Bourdieu's theory of practice

Bourdieu describes his concepts as 'open concepts designed to guide empirical work' (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 107). His concepts have empirical relevance. In an interview with Beate Krais (cited in Bourdieu et al., 1991, p. 252), Bourdieu suggests that the practical world has its own logic, and it cannot be limited to theoretical knowledge. He maintains that therefore an agent knows the social world around him better than any theoretician. Bourdieu's concepts help to explain the social order of the empirical world. This section is intended to explore such concepts and notions in Bourdieu's thought.

Bourdieu's theory has usually been applied on agents from subordinate

groups in society. At the centre of his theoretical framework is Bourdieu's conceptual triad with special emphasis on his notion of *habitus* (see Figure 1). *Habitus* is a disposition formed during the early life experiences of an individual. However, it keeps changing and developing throughout one's life, despite having the greatest impact of early socialisation. Change and choice are important aspects of *habitus*, even though choice is limited by the social structure (both change and choice will be revisited in this section). Bourdieu's theory has been frequently used for analysing the everyday interactions of disadvantaged groups and their day-to-day struggle for survival. *Habitus* provides a method for simultaneously analysing 'the experience of social agents and ... the objective structures which make this experience possible' (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 782).

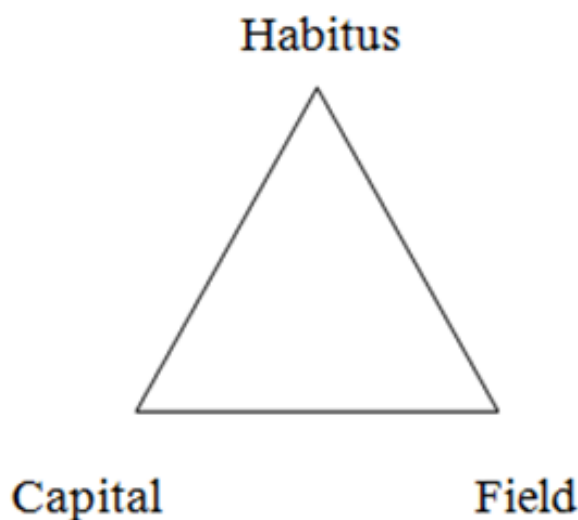


Figure 1: Bourdieu's Conceptual Triad

Habitus is treated as something that is shaped by structure but simultaneously agents can exercise choice and agency in constructing their *habitus*. Bourdieu (1977, 1990a) attempted to balance structure and agency as complementary forces, thus:

- Agency: human behaviour can transform the existing social structures.
- Social Structure: social structures can change human behaviour (by permitting certain actions or making them impossible).

This is a reciprocal relationship: behaviour affects structures, and structures affect behaviour. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, with its capacity to accommodate unpredictable vagueness, continuous reformation and restructuring, individuality and collectiveness, compatibility and incompatibility in the field of action, makes it as attractive as ordinary life (see also Figure 2). *Habitus* is designed to fit in with the complexity of the real world by making it more adaptable to the conditions of agents under observation; this in itself is a great strength of the notion of *habitus* (see also Reay, 1995).

Bourdieu considered *habitus* as a method, rather than as an idea (Bourdieu, 1985; cited in Mahar, 1990). *Habitus* changes as time goes by. Thompson (1991) notes that an agent's *habitus* is the sum of all his experiences. By internalising the ongoing socialisation, *habitus* keeps adding layers to itself; this transforms, restructures and enriches it with every passing day. Reay (2004b, p. 434) says that *habitus* is 'permeable and responsive' to the social practices etc. in the world around. Thus it develops and changes over time, though the greatest impact is still that of early life experiences (Bourdieu, 1990b; 1990c).

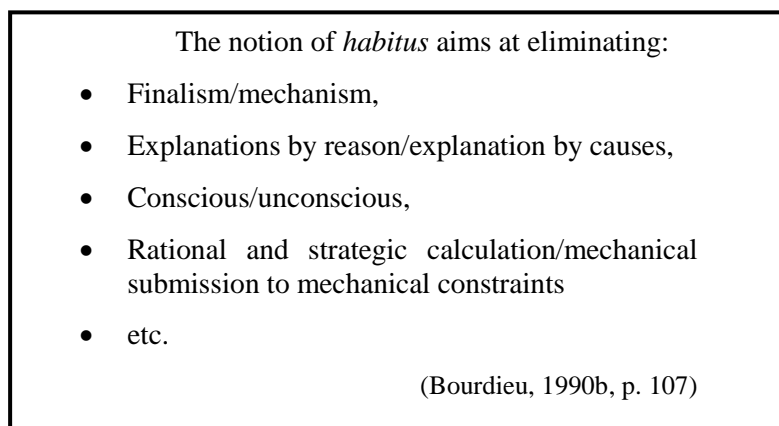


Figure 2: Habitus

The concept of *habitus* is flexible because it manages to combine subjective and objective aspects. It is subjective inasmuch as it permits choices, and objective inasmuch as it shows that choices are limited. Although 'choice is at the heart of *habitus*' (Reay 1995, p. 355; 2004b, p. 435), the choices available to individuals are limited by their *habitus* and all the capital they possess.

There is fluidity in the concept of *habitus*, which makes it both a theory and a method which can be used in empirical research (Bourdieu, 1993). Together with the associated concepts of capital and field, which can be defined respectively as 'accumulable social-symbolic resources' and 'the arena of social life and struggle' (Collins, 1993, p. 116), *habitus* as a method gives a broader, and deeper, view of the structures in the social world. The three concepts together are the tools with which I shall explore the social inequalities which my participants and all agents have to cope with. The greatest attraction of the triad to me is that it enables me to focus on structures of society, to analyse complex behaviours to take the context of those behaviours into consideration. Bourdieu (1991) says that the inhabitants of the social world are powerful, or weak, to varying degrees depending on the type and amount of 'capital they possess, which may be economic, social, cultural, linguistic, etc, capital. The owners of this capital use it to crvarious social 'fields' in the social world. Different kinds of capital are accorded different value in different fields. Knowledge of Sindhi is essential for survival in rural Sindh and therefore invaluable but not highly prized since everybody has this capital. Knowledge of English is highly prized in universities, where it is essential, but not all students have it to the same degree. Village skills like handicrafts (e.g. embroidery), animal husbandry or agriculture are highly prized in the village but not in the city, a factory, an office or a university. Skills in handling explosives, metal drills and cracking safes will be highly prized in the criminal fraternity but not in a university library. Therefore people having these skills ('owning this kind of capital') will, even with the same kind of capital, be more powerful, or less powerful, in different fields. Power depends not only on the capital but also on the field in which it is employed. Different fields ('force fields') recognise different kinds of capital. This divides the social world. It creates layers of people (a hierarchy of people) who are more powerful or less powerful. The 'agents' (people) who possess more recognised capital are more powerful. Those who possess huge amounts of non-recognised capital (e.g. a hafiz, who can recite the entire Qur'an by heart, and seeks employment as a teaching assistant in England) will remain

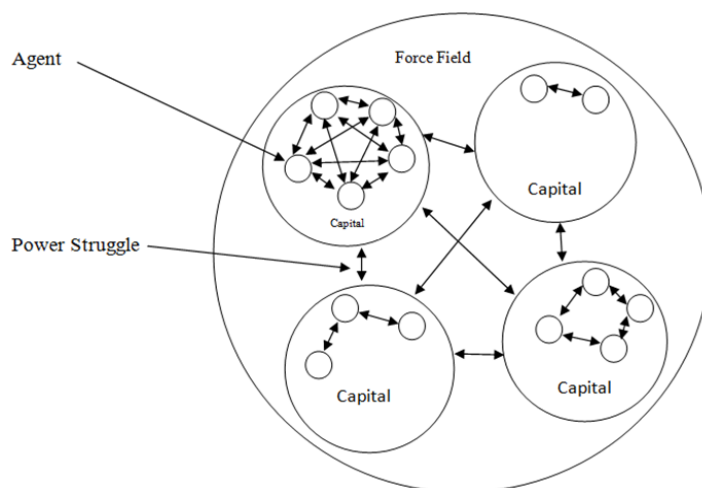
weak in spite of their capital.

Capital and the power associated with it can be passed on ('reproduced') from generation to generation. The rich can pass on their money and possessions to their children ('economic capital') and also give them a good education ('educational capital', 'cultural capital'). The social structures (which are dominated by powerful people) reproduce these differences. Figure 3: Power Struggle

Differences in power lead to power struggle, and everybody uses the tools at their disposal to maintain and, if possible, increase their power. Bourdieu's sociological research focuses on power struggle, especially domination of class and gender, based on the aspects which divide a Figure 3: Power Struggle force field and decide what happens in it (see Figure 3).

A field is a system of social positions occupied by agents and institutions, the power relations exerted by the same agents and institutions to occupy those social positions. Every field is 'bounded' (Grenfell and James, 2004, p. 510), as it values certain practices, behaviours, kinds of capital etc. and deprecates others. Bourdieu (1986) says that family status, the amount of economic capital, the influence of an educational institution, the size of the social network etc. determine the position of an agent in the field. He also points out that there is a living relationship between *habitus* and field, and that the same *habitus* can lead to very different practices depending on the field (see Bourdieu, 1990b; Reay, 2004b; Wacquant, 1989). Each field is different because it is 'both the product and producer of the *habitus* which is specific and appropriate to the field' (Jenkins, 1992, p. 84).

Unequal distribution of capital gives birth to power struggles and makes some agents dominant and others dominated. The capital owned by *dominated agents* is undervalued in the field. By contrast, *dominant agents* possess capital that is respected by other members of the field and makes the owners powerful. They can exert force and affect the field by means of their capital. The field obeys the rules made by the dominant agents. In every social field, agents (and groups of agents) invest their symbolic capital to earn symbolic power (McClelland, 1990; Cicourel, 1993a; Reay, 1995



All possessions or kinds of capital which are significant in a social field are called 'symbolic capital'. It gives symbolic domination to those acquiring it (Moore, 2004). Jenkins (1992) explains this further by saying that each agent aims at maintaining and improving his position by acquiring more and more symbolic capital. Owning valuable capital is not enough. It must also be activated at the right time and in the right manner, and the response of the field to this activation is also important.

Since people have capital and can activate it, social structures can change. While the same people, families and groups often continue to dominate throughout their lives and over generations, and others are similarly subordinated, this is not necessarily so. People can change their position in society, even if only slightly, and thus social structure can change.

Lareau and Horvat (1999) point out that a field decides the value of the possessions (capital), material or symbolic, of any agent. Bourdieu (1986) extended the concept of capital by analogy in order to clarify the structure and functioning of the social world. He and his followers acknowledged other forms of capital, including

- Cultural capital (Dumais, 2002; Lareau and Horvat, 1999; Moore, 2004; Reay, 2004a)
- Social capital (Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch, 1995; Webb, 2011)
- Linguistic capital
- Educational capital

- Emotional capital (Gillies, 2006; Reay, 2000)
- Physical capital (Shilling, 2004)

The total capital present in a force field consists of different portions of different kinds of capital distributed among the classes and individuals in the field. The amount of capital in their possession determines their position in the force field. Agents with varying portions of different capitals act and react in different ways.

Bourdieu says that social order starts with the practice of classifying, of creating distinctions. The most important of these are social class and gender. In ordinary life, social inequalities do not result from direct institutional discrimination but power is subtly imposed on individuals so that certain everyday assets (skills, behaviours, types of capital) are treated as legitimate and others as unacceptable (McNay, 1999). Moore (2004) argues that objects, practices and dispositions which are treated as superior are not innately superior and have no intrinsic qualities which make them superior per se. Their meaning and significance is only relative. Some things and tastes are cultured because others are vulgar; some are reasonable because others are unreasonable. The relationship and the distance between the two mark the relationship and the distance between groups in the social hierarchy. Therefore, the social distance gives value to the symbolic relationships within a social (cultural) field.

Symbolic violence is primarily a subtle, invisible mode of domination that prevents it from being recognised as such. It is the imposition of a certain type of thought and perception upon dominated social agents (see Bourdieu, 1991; Bourdieu, 2001; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Krais, 2006; Moore, 2004). It implants certain unconscious structures into the social order which tend to maintain and propagate the ways in which the dominant class habitually acts. As a result, the dominated internalise their powerless position, accept it as rightful and fair, believe that the power structure is just, let the dominant classes oppress them and do not rebel.

Symbolic violence arises out of a social order based on a certain kind of classification. This is embedded in the *habitus* of both the dominant and the dominated and makes established practices appear natural.

Bourdieu's theoretical framework discusses the power relations existing in any force field very effectively (see Figure 3). He explains class divisions

in terms that go beyond the economic differences. He describes how all agents, dominant and dominated, actively participate in the power struggles inherent in the social order. Each agent receives a *habitus*, i.e. code of practices, from the force field and in turn changes the force field. Consequently, according to Bourdieu, individual agents have the ability to transform their lives, challenge the existing systems, develop a subversive *habitus*, and use reflexivity, i.e. the tendency to interpret and act according to personal judgment.

Application of Bourdieu's Concepts in Different Cultures

Bourdieu's theory can be applied to various contexts. Bourdieu himself talks about the transferability of his theory to Japanese culture in *Practical Reason* (1998; cited in Robbins, 2004) [although Jenkins (1992) insisted that Bourdieu's theory of culture, esp. his *Distinction* (1984), is idiosyncratic to French society]. Robbins (2004) mentions that the preface to English edition of *Homo Academicus* (Bourdieu, 1988) discusses the adoption of the analysis to English education system. Robbins, further, draws comparison between the French and English culture and society between 1960s to the present time. He explains that Bourdieu's applicability to English society signifies his applicability across cultures, insisting upon the universality of Bourdieuan framework. This section will discuss the applicability of Bourdieu's theories by scholars, regardless of the limitations of time and space.

Bourdieu's framework has been used by researchers all around the world in a variety of research contexts. The uniqueness of his framework lies in the fact that it is not made for one type of situation, rather it is applicable to different sorts of research [see for instance, Fowler, 2006, 2009, 2012, and Sapiro, 1996, 2002 for literature; Krais 1993, 2006 for gender studies]. His conceptual triad is widely used in the context of education. His Social Reproduction Theory has been useful in understanding the significance of the issues related to class and racial differences in educational setting. His concept of cultural capital helps explain the reasons behind academic success and failure of students from different classes of the society to some extent. Following are some of the research studies successfully conducted by using Bourdieu's framework.

There have been studies solely conducted to provide an insightful understanding of *habitus*. In her 1995 study, Reay (1995) attempts to define and demarcate the concept of *habitus* in order to understand her

ethnographic work conducted in Primary Classrooms to explore the influence of children's *habitus* on their understanding of the issues like gender, race and class. In another work, however, though Reay (2004b) explores the meaning and understanding of the term '*habitus*' more clearly yet she does it with reference to the other relevant concepts like, 'field' and 'capital'. This follows another empirical study in educational setting with *habitus* at its core. Through application of Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, Crozier *et al.* (2008) discovered the relation between institutional culture and entry requirements for a student in an institution of higher education

Reay, David, and Ball (2001) attempted to develop the concept of *institutional habitus*. Though they are not the pioneers of the term, yet they tried to fill the gaps in our understanding of the concept by considering it both theoretically and practically. Their focus is on the influence of educational institutions on higher education choices. An important observation was that 'higher education applicants are located within a matrix of influences which are best represented by overlapping circles of individual, family, friends and institution', though the influences vary individually. Reay (1998) found that social class (and also gender) play significant role in higher education choices; in that case, the pupils from middle class families always knew that they would be going to university unlike those from a working class background. Youngsters from the privileged class own the cultural capital that gives them knowledge of higher education institutions, available courses and the application process (Reay, 1998; Lamont and Lareau 1988; cited in Smyth and Banks, 2012). Also, the schools attended by students from this class usually provide more guidance towards choices available after completing schooling and such academic training that is beneficial in getting admission in courses of their choice [see Cookson and Persell, 1985 and Mullen, 2009; both cited in Smyth and Banks, 2012; Falsey and Heyms, 1984; McDonough, 1997]. This, in turn, develops an institutional *habitus* that encourages higher education.

Smyth and Banks (2012) researched the access available to young people to decide their future/choices for higher education. They found that the individual *habitus*, the institutional *habitus* (the amount and type of guidance provided at school) and young people's own agency (the individual effort on part of the student to seek out information on different options available and evaluate his choices) are responsible in decisions made to join higher education and/or see alternatives in and outside higher

education. Smyth and Banks also found that students from middle class families were less interested in the guidance classes conducted at school because they already had enough knowledge and had a clear view of available choices and therefore had clear idea of the path each intends to choose. On the other hand, working class students are dependent on information and resources provided by school (Reay, David, and Ball, 2005; Smyth and Banks, 2012). For students from Smyth and Banks' (2012, p. 277) working class school, university was 'geographically closer but culturally far removed'. Following the concept of institutional habitus from the works of McDonough (1997) and Reay (1998), Ashwin (2009) used Bourdieuan theory to find out the position of different institutions in the field of higher education, and the impact of their position on their *institutional habitus*.

Though different types of capital have been researched cultural capital, together with *habitus*, have been a favourite of educational researchers. A study was carried out by Dumais (2002) on the impact made by cultural capital on *habitus*, to understand the educational success and failure of 8th grade pupils, both boys and girls, thus focussing on gender differences. Dumais brought forward variations in the perception of male and female students. He notes that *habitus* has a very strong effect on all participants. The author argues that traditional gender stereotypes play a role in the lack of cultural participation by male students. And therefore, female students can be more encouraged to make use of their cultural capital to succeed in school. Reay (2004a) presents a theoretical explaining of cultural capital and discusses three cases on the dependence of cultural and economic capital over each other in academic success. She presents the influence of cultural capital on improving the standards of education, followed by an empirical analysis of parents' involvement in bringing cultural capital to support education. She discusses the reliance on parental involvement within the British educational system and how some children suffer greatly due to that. In another study based in Hong Kong, Lin (1999) focuses on the theoretical notions of cultural capital and *habitus*, alongside symbolic violence, and creative, discursive agency. Following that, a study of four different classrooms in different socio-economic backgrounds attempted to find out whether the students and teachers were doing-English-lessons in the reproduction or in the transformation of the students' social worlds.

Another type of capital, not primarily discussed by Bourdieu but developed by other researchers following Bourdieu is emotional capital, which also

widely captures the interest of researchers. Reay (2000) tries to explore the influence of emotional capital on home-school relationship. She explores the parent involvement in education and its effects on class and gender. The research explains the relationship between educational success, emotional capital and emotional wellbeing. Gillies (2006), also finds out the impact of emotional capital and the demand of emotional investment of parents during schooling of their children, through his study.

Of all the concepts discussed by Bourdieu through his conceptual triad, field has been least researched by the educational researchers. Deer (2003) describes the significance of field, through his research with higher education as the social field and adopts the dualistic approach (*habitus* and field) for understanding social change. She theoretically reviews Bourdieu's interpretations of higher education. Following this, she uses her findings of a comparative study of the evolution of French and English higher education systems to test Bourdieu's relevant conceptual tools. Another research focussing on Higher Education is Naidoo's (2004) based in South Africa. It also examines Bourdieu's understanding of Higher Education as a field yet finding very powerful forces, socio-political and economic, acting in this field. Despite acknowledging the dependence of the three concepts of *habitus*, field and capital over each other in the introduction to her study, Naidoo leaves the other two and concentrates on field only. Marginson's (2008) study focuses the field of higher education, attempting to find out a link between institutional culture and the position of the higher education institution in the field of higher education. Another study by Lareau and Horvat (1999) mentions that every type of capital works in its particular field and thus no conclusion can be drawn without understanding and discussing the importance of the field. By using interviews and classroom observation, they try to find out the inclusion/exclusion tension rising in schools due to race, class and cultural capital. The study reveals the concerns, as well as open criticism, of black parents over race discrimination against their children at school.

Dillabough (2004:489) examines Bourdieu's theory in the light of feminist theories and explains how Bourdieu's work '... stands as a highly focused, realistic and generative attempt ... to chart the problems of subordination, differentiation and hierarchy and to expose the possibilities, as well as the limits, of gendered selfhood', with specific reference to educational context. She discusses Bourdieu's theoretical position on symbolic domination [masculine domination, in her case].

Bourdieu in Pakistani Context

I intend to apply Bourdieu to Pakistani context in my PhD research. My research focuses young men and women from rural and economically weak backgrounds, who come to city for the purpose of education, mostly at an advanced stage of their lives for university education. All of my participants have either already finished their university education or have quit their studies due to one or the other personal reason. The study is expected to find out, through life story interview, the identity crisis and the inclusion/exclusion tension that my participants faced and some of them are still facing due to the change in their social environment, i.e. coming from village to city and to a university where they met people from different socio-economic backgrounds. Some of my participants are doing very well in their practical lives due to their dual experience and knowledge of the rural and urban lifestyle and their ability to successfully deal with different people and circumstances in their lives whereas others are still struggling in the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and, most importantly, multi-ability urban society.

A participant in my research left university education due to problems at home including an ailing father and monetary restrictions yet he is satisfied with his current job in school administration, which does not even pay him enough. Another participant joined armed forces, a capital which makes him a dominant agent in the field, both at his village and elsewhere in the country. A third participant regrets her being a female and from rural background due to the attitude meted out at her job, something that she never felt earlier at her village or even during university education. Thus my participants are from similar socio-cultural and economic backgrounds yet they have different experiences and attitudes towards life.

Although it can be assumed, following Bourdieu, that members of the rural and economically weak social class understand and experience things in a similar way due to having same social identity, yet it is not to be forgotten that, the individual identity of each member of the class and each of the participants of my research is different and that is where they all come up with different consequences and outcomes in their lives. They are all understanding and viewing things in similar ways due to their social habitus and, no doubt, they are meted out with similar responses and reaction from the members of other social classes for belonging to same social field, yet their lives are not identical especially due to their separate individual habitus which are developed out of their personal history and their degree of

acceptance of each characteristic of social habitus. And it is this second characteristic which brings forth the differences among siblings even. Each of them have different attitude towards the events coming across them in life.

By analysing the behaviour of the participants in my research it can be understood that such and such behaviour is due to such and such trait developed in their individual/social habitus. One of my female participants was put into Nikah when she was born. Once she grew, she wanted to get university education which resulted in terrible circumstances. Her in-laws started torturing her and her family. The more difficult her conditions were, the more courageous she became. She appealed for a divorce and got it. However, she is very upset about being a woman, as she cannot do what she could have. Another female participant, who finds herself to be very confident, had her everyday concerns and worries, for example, her elder sister was preferred to her during childhood due to the difference in their nature and behaviour. Both of these participants admit that they lived every phase of their lives in the most wonderful ways and they both mention that they have lived their lives following their own conditions, without being dictated by others. Yet one is so upset about what life had in store for her and the other so contented with what she made out of her life. But it cannot be understood, if the latter would be equally confident and contented if she had to face what the former female participant faced. The two women possess different types of capital at the moment, with the former possessing a place of a divorced woman, struggling to get a good job to support her family where her father is above eighty years of age and her brothers are only school-going in a society like Pakistan and the latter, being a university professor, well-established in her job and well-supported by her family of father and brothers in good jobs, currently enjoying a good social status in the society, which, in turn, makes it possible for her to exert good force on the social field and become a dominant agent. Thus the various capital owned by these participants and their families help develop their habitus then and now.

Apart from habitus, field plays a very significant role in the lives on my participants and in the development of their particular attitudes and idiosyncrasies. My participants are chosen from different poverty stricken rural areas of Pakistan. Yet the socio-economic conditions at no two places and villages can be same because every village is different. And even the conditions of individual families living in same village are different. So

obviously my participants saw different scenario of life. Despite having similar social habitus and similar social capital, and despite people showing similar attitudes towards them due to the social field they belong, they are not the same. Thus, as Bourdieu mentions, their past and present position in the social structure, the size of the social network and the volume of capital that each of these agents hold in the network determine their social standing.

My study has still to be determined which factors affect which part of the identity of my participants. It is yet to be seen, whether it is their habitus, developed out of the capital they possessed and the field they belonged, that provides their current identity or otherwise; and if Bourdieu's framework provides an absolute answer to their differentness or something else also plays a part in the lives of these participants, apart from their habitus, capital and field, which helped them reach where they are currently.

Conclusion

This paper was aimed at presenting theoretical understanding of Bourdieu's framework with special attention to his Conceptual Triad of Habitus, Field and Capital. According to Bourdieu, habitus is formed during an agent's early interaction with the social field, yet it keeps restructuring throughout his life with his countless experiences. Habitus determines an agent's dispositions, behaviour, practices and properties whereas the capital, s/he and her/his family possess, determines her/his position in the field. Power struggle and striving for more and maintaining what an agent has continue in the social field at all times. Yet a social field follows the rules and laws made by dominant agents whose capital is recognised and valued.

Bourdieu's framework of habitus, field and capital is used by many researchers, all around the world to understand their social problems related mainly, yet not limited, to the field of education. I have also mentioned above the Pakistani social context to which I intend to apply this framework.

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