



## Research review

# The use of Pierre Bourdieu's *distinction* concepts in scientific articles studying food and eating: A narrative review



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## ABSTRACT

This article reviews and discusses scientific papers on eating practices that have used Pierre Bourdieu's concepts presented in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. It aims to synthesize and analyze theoretical and empirical studies on the theme in order to present Bourdieu's contributions to the field, advances in his theories, and directions for future research. Exclusion criteria were: not written in Portuguese, English, Spanish, or French; not published in a peer-reviewed journal; not analyzing food or eating; and not using Bourdieu's concepts as presented in *Distinction* as the main theoretical framework. In this narrative review, we found 38 articles, which were categorized main themes: food choice and provisioning, taste, social class, food symbolism, the body, and the scientific field of food and eating. The taste of luxury and the taste of necessity were broadly applied on the works found in this review and were observed among the lower and upper classes, manifesting differently in each class. These studies show that while Bourdieu's theories are still highly relevant to understanding contemporary social groups, they may be improved when combined with other frameworks and theorists. We highlight as directions for future research manners in which gender and the environment interact with the habitus and food choices. Finally, this review points to new areas of investigation that may help improve the use of Bourdieu's concepts in exploring health inequalities, such as differences in eating practices and habitus within populations with low socioeconomic status.

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## 1. Introduction

The human act of eating is a complex topic. Eating is indispensable to fulfilling our physiological needs, while it also represents an important space for social relations to occur (Fischler & Masson, 2010). It is symbolic system that translates and reflects a society in its social, political, economic, aesthetic, and religious aspects (Poulain, 2002). Eating encompasses a system of communication, values, and rules (Lupton, 2000). For this reason, the study of eating and its related aspects must recognize historical, social, cultural, and subjective factors. By better understanding the importance of the social dimension of eating practices<sup>1</sup>, we can improve our understanding of health-related behaviors (Amir, 2011).

In this sense, the social sciences provide important perspectives toward understanding the food. Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) was one of the most influential contemporary sociologists (Coulangeon & Duval, 2015). His work has been read, and his theories applied in various areas, such as consumption, arts, education, and food studies. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* is Bourdieu's (2010 [1979]) most cited work to date (Coulangeon & Duval, 2015). In this book, Bourdieu presents three key concepts of his work: habitus, capital, and field. Through these terms, he proposes a way of understanding eating and the symbolic and material codes related to it.

The term habitus has been defined in several different ways within the human sciences. For Durkheim (2002 [1983]), habitus was a deep, internal general state that oriented actions in a durable manner. Bourdieu, however, tried to incorporate into his conceptualization of habitus the dialectical relationship between the agent and the environment. *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 2010 [1979]) proposed a habitus that is simultaneously structured by, and structurally representative of the social world (Setton, 2002). Therefore, habitus can be understood as an embodied arrangement of social structures that predisposes an individual to certain actions, in accordance with the social context in which it is produced (Bourdieu, 2010 [1979]).

The habitus reconciles the apparent opposition between exterior and interior by integrating individual systems and social constructs (Setton, 2002). While class habitus incorporates the conditions of a particular social class and its conditionings, it is also the result of a continuous individual process (Bourdieu, 2010 [1979]). The field concept relates to the habitus by representing a structured social space with a symbolic system (Bourdieu, 2010 [1979]). For Bourdieu, people are inserted into social spaces coupled with a symbolic system and compete for specific types of interchangeable capitals (Bourdieu, 2010 [1979]). Capitals are also central to Bourdieu's understanding of class. For him, it is the composition and volume of capitals combined with the social

trajectory (or social mobility) that defines “social class” (Power, 1999). As a result of the interrelation between habitus, field, and capital, practices are always adjusted to the conditions of which they are the products (Bourdieu, 2010 [1979]).

By classifying objects, people classify themselves too, thus distinguishing themselves and presenting their habitus. Such a distinction may also be observed through eating practices and tastes (Bourdieu, 2010 [1979]). The act of eating obeys a symbolic code that can be observed through the access to, and appreciation of, certain types of foods. The different classifications given to food (such as light, heavy, healthy and unhealthy) also correspond to a system used to classify people (Bourdieu, 2010 [1979]).

In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Bourdieu (2010 [1979]) presents the results of the empirical research he conducted in France from 1963 to 1968. Using a quantitative approach, he investigated household food spending, food consumption, the amount of time spent cooking, the sexual division of labor within the household, and preferred delicacies as reported by different professional groups (i.e., manufacturers, merchants, academics, and liberal professionals). His results showed that manufacturers and merchants spent a higher percentage of their household spending on food (37.4%) than did academics and liberal professionals (24.4%). However, the former group preferred foods that were cheaper, heavier, and greasier. Their most commonly consumed foods were cereals, wines, and canned and wild meat. Academics and liberal professionals, on the other hand, showed a preference for lighter, refined food items. While academics reported a preference for bread, dairy, sugar, and non-alcoholic beverages, liberal professionals had even more expensive taste, preferring cheeses, meats (especially the most expensive meats), vegetables, fruits, and fish. That analysis led to the identification of two taste categories: the taste of luxury/freedom and the taste of necessity. The taste of luxury/freedom was established among the dominant classes (liberal professionals and academics), whose privileged access to certain types of food and to the cultural capital necessary to appreciate those foods were a characteristic of their social status. In contrast, the taste of necessity was characteristic of the working class, whose basic body needs were more satisfied by the heavier, fulfilling foods.

The book published by Philippe Coulangeon and Julien Duval, entitled *Trente ans après La Distinction de Pierre Bourdieu* (2013), situates the relevance of *Distinction* within a contemporary context. Since Bourdieu's results emerged, multiple studies have applied his framework to investigate how food practices are developed and reproduced. Despite the use of Bourdieu's concepts in food works, there are no review studies about how his ideas are being used and improved to understand social aspects of eating. Thus, in this review we analyze the scientific articles researching food and eating behaviors based on the concepts presented in Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. We aim to synthesize and analyze the theoretical and empirical studies on the theme in order to present Bourdieu's contributions to the field, the advances made to his theories, and directions for future research.

<sup>1</sup> Defined as a set of objective and subjective data used to describe and understand the phenomenon of food (Poulain, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> The consumption of goods to express one's social identity and to distinguish oneself from others.

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