

# Exploring the Transformation of Habitus: a Case Study of Forum Theatre in Estonia

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**Abstract:** Habitus is a key concept in Bourdieusian social analysis, which is used to explain (lack of) change in society. Bourdieu was optimistic about the possibility of change in society, but he did not provide an exact recipe for this. I will try to fill this knowledge gap by providing an empirical example of transformation of habitus. In order to achieve this aim I will utilize a Participatory Action Research method called Forum Theatre from my fieldwork with the Russophone minority in Estonia. In results, I will address the change of habitus of participants.

**Keywords:** transformation of habitus, participatory action research, Forum Theatre

## Explorando la Transformación del Hábito: un Estudio de Caso del Teatro Interactivo en Estonia

**Resumen:** El hábito es un concepto clave en el análisis social de Bourdieu, que se utiliza para explicar (la ausencia de) el cambio en la sociedad. Bourdieu era optimista sobre la posibilidad de cambio en la sociedad, pero no propuso una receta detallada para el mismo. En este artículo intento aportar a esta carencia proponiendo un ejemplo empírico de transformación del hábito. Para conseguir este objetivo utilizaré el método de Investigación Acción Participativa denominada Teatro Interactivo en mi trabajo de campo con la minoría rusoparlante en Estonia. Como resultado, abordaré el cambio del hábito de las personas participantes.

**Palabras clave:** transformación del hábito, investigación acción participativa, teatro interactivo

## 1. Introduction

Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and capital are used as a metatheoretical framework to analyse the social world (Bourdieu 1977, 1986). The interconnectivity and relations between these concepts constitute the core of practises of subject positions and co-constitute the objective structures of society which, in turn, constitute the subjective structures. Habitus, a central concept in the Bourdieusian approach, plays a pivotal role in these relations.

This kind of Bourdieusian approach is often deemed to be deterministic (e.g., see Atkinson 2020), explaining why changes in society are not likely to happen. However, Bourdieu himself was more optimistic about the possibility of change; he stated that it *is* possible to transform the habitus of individual subjects; however, he did not provide an exact recipe for this. This paper addresses this knowledge gap by contributing with an empirical example.

The article is built on two major pillars. First, I will provide a theoretical framework for transformation of the habitus, and, second, I will illustrate the process with an empirical example, using a participatory action research (PAR) method called Forum Theatre (FT). The main idea in PAR is that research is done in collaboration with participants; FT is an empowering method, where spectators of a theatrical play are invited to break the so-called fourth wall, and become *spect-actors*, therefore co-creating the play and being involved in the whole research process. This allows to research the change of habitus simultaneously, from the perspective of researcher, and research participants. The article therefore has multiple aims: First, to address the knowledge gap to Bourdieuseian approach in transforming the habitus, and, secondly, to research if the PAR process will influence participants habitus; if yes, then how and to what extent.

The article is structured as follows: First, I will provide an overview of the concept habitus in the Bourdieusian approach, followed by the elaboration of the division between primary and secondary habitus. This is followed by introducing the education framework of Dewey and Freire. Second, I will present a participatory action research method called Forum Theatre, and show how it could be used to transform habitus, based on the ideas of Dewey and Freire. This is followed by an example of my empirical fieldwork with the Russophone minority in Estonia. I will conclude with discussion on the process of field research and my findings.

The innovation of this article is built upon the above-mentioned idea of the separation of habitus into primary and secondary habitus, followed by a Bourdieusian abstract ‘recipe’ to address the change of habitus, implementing concepts like ‘scientific reflexivity’ and ‘artistic creativity’ (Gorski 2016, 288) for achieving transformation. I will share a case where FT as a method transformed the habitus.

## 2. The significance of habitus

The action research process presented in this paper combines Forum Theater as Participatory Action Research with two core concepts from Bourdieu, scientific reflexivity and artistic creativity. To make the connection between action research and these concepts, the paper builds on the work of John Dewey and Paulo Freire. Consequently, the following subsections address Bourdieu’s concepts first and Dewey’s and Freire’s next.

### 2.1. Key Bourdieusian concepts

As mentioned, habitus is one of the key concepts in the Bourdieusian theoretical framework. The separation of habitus from the field and capital is done here only on an analytical level; typically, in the analysis, all concepts are intertwined and simultaneously observed. Habitus is defined by Bourdieu as the property of actors – “a structured and structuring structure” (Bourdieu 1977, 167). Three distinct, but interconnected meanings of ‘structure’ are present in this definition: 1) the term “structured” refers to the idea that past experience influences agents, the most notable being family and the education system – e.g the primary and secondary habitus; 2) “structuring” refers to the idea that past experiences constitute an agent’s practices and, lastly, 3) it is a “structure” in the sense that it has some inner consistency.