


SOCIAL INTERACTION IN THE THEORIES OF ERVING GOFFMAN AND PIERRE BOURDIEU

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ABSTRACT

The choice of the theme is justified by the relevance and breadth that the theme carries and by the need to deepen the sociological debate on social interaction. Discussions about space are not recent and there are several theoretical and methodological contributions. The main objective of this article is to discuss two contemporary theoretical models that seek to analyze the sociological dimension and compare the theories of Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu on the social interaction of the individual in groups. First, the main contributions of each theorist in the educational field will be presented. Next, a critical comparison will be made between the theories about the social interaction of the individual in the groups, highlighting the convergences and divergences of the theorists in question. Finally, the final considerations will reflect on the relevance of these theories for contemporary understanding in the field of education and social integration. It is appropriate to point out that the approaches of Goffman and Bourdieu converge, among others, in the sense of directing their gaze to the minutiae of social life, to everyday situations that may initially seem "natural", but which, under the sociological view, can reveal about social dynamics (reifications).

Keywords: Erving Goffman. Pierre Bourdieu. Education. Social Interaction.

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INTRODUCTION

The idea for this article came up during the classes of the Theories of Social Sciences discipline of the Professional Master's Degree in Sociology (PROFSOCIO) at the State University of Mato Grosso (UNEMAT/SINOP-MT), in the first semester of 2024. The central proposal is to meet the final evaluation, suggested by the teacher of the referred discipline, with the intention of evaluating the ability to perform in the comprehension of texts and development of writing of the master's students. In this perspective, for this article it was chosen to analyze the theory of social interaction of two authors of Contemporary Sociology: Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu.

Social interaction refers to a central concept in sociology, where it presents the process by which individuals and groups connect, becoming an integral part of an already existing community or society, with its related but constantly changing social, economic, cultural, and political characteristics. This process involves the internalization of norms, values, and practices that promote connection and harmonious coexistence. The understanding of how social interaction occurs is sustained by cohesion, marginalization, and essential change for the inclusion of the individual regardless of his or her needs and desires in an already existing context.

In this sense, the contributions of Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu, although they share the critique of determinism of functionalist and structuralist theories, offer different approaches to understanding how individuals act and interact within society. Goffman, with his microsociological analysis, focuses on the level of face-to-face interactions, exploring how people, through social performances, adjust their behaviors according to the cultural and social expectations of the moment. Bourdieu, on the other hand, in a macrosociological approach, introduces concepts such as habitus, capital, and field to explain how individual practices and choices are conditioned by broader social structures, such as class and power. This paper seeks to compare the perspectives of these two theorists, exploring how their ideas complement each other in understanding social interactions, while highlighting the dynamic relationship between individual action and structural social forces. In addition, both provide important tools for understanding interactions in the educational environment, whether by managing impressions in daily interactions (Goffman, 1959) or by analyzing the structures that shape educational access and opportunities (Bourdieu, 2007).

EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVES IN THE THEORIES OF ERVING GOFFMAN AND PIERRE BOURDIEU

Frese (2008) argues that Goffman's approach to the sociological aspects of education is distinctive for its focus on microsociology and face-to-face interaction. He offered a unique insight into how social norms and expectations influence individual behavior. His theories on "ritual interaction", "stigma" and "role-playing" continue to influence the field of sociology and are often applied in communication studies, social psychology, behavioral sciences, among others. This is evidenced by the fact that his works are widely cited and his ideas on social interaction incorporated into various disciplines. He is considered one of the most important sociologists of the twentieth century, and his work continues to be an essential reference for students and researchers in the field.

Erving Goffman was born in 1922 and, throughout his life, became one of the most influential and cited researchers in the areas of Humanities and Social Sciences, being highly recognized for his academic contributions. He began his education in Canada at the University of Manitoba in 1939, then transferred to the University of Toronto, where he graduated with a degree in sociology and anthropology in 1945. Later, he obtained his doctorate at the University of Chicago, in 1953, with a thesis on the social organization of an island in the West Hebrides, which inspired his first book, "The Representation of the Self in Everyday Life" (Nizet; Rigaux, 2016).

After completing his doctorate, Goffman began his academic career at the University of Chicago as an assistant professor. In 1958, he moved to the University of California, Berkeley, where he became a full professor in 1962. In 1968, Goffman joined the University of Pennsylvania as a professor, where he also served as chairman of the Department of Sociology. He was president of the American Sociological Association in 1981, which demonstrated his impact on the discipline (Nizet; Rigaux, 2016).

Goffman (2011), is widely recognized for his innovative approach to the analysis of social interaction, especially through the concept of 'social dramaturgy'. In his work "The Representation of the Self in Everyday Life" (1959), he uses the metaphor of theater to explain how people behave in society. He argues that, in everyday life, individuals act as if they were in a play, presenting themselves in specific ways to make good impressions on others. In the aforementioned work, he describes social interactions as theatrical performances, where people play roles, use scenery, clothing and gestures, all with the aim

of building a favorable image. These performances change according to context and audience, and people adjust their behaviors to match societal expectations.

Goffman's works manifest themselves in various languages of exploration that cross various areas of education, mainly anthropology and sociology. Although his contributions are often associated with North American "symbolic interactionism", it is important to highlight that his studies are part of the field of microsociology, privileging the collection of data through the observation of the other, the method he calls "serious ethnography" (Goffman, 2011). This approach, based on facts and observations, is narrated from the perspective of the status experienced by the individual, through his theoretical lens in the essays. Goffman (2011) develops the sociology of face-to-face interactions, highlighting how people constantly manage their representations to integrate socially and how the dynamics of impression control influence behavior and social organization, ensuring that everyone presents a harmonious and consistent image to the public, through conscious and unconscious practices, managing their social representations and maintaining order and cohesion in their daily interactions.

In addition to the work cited above, Goffman published several other works: "Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates" (1961): which makes an in-depth analysis of psychiatric institutions and the dynamics of power and stigma within them. This work is a study of how institutions shape the behavior and identity of individuals. "Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity" (1963): examines how people manage their identities and the issue of social stigma, addressing how society deals with individuals who have "deteriorated identities". "Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience" (1974): Introduces the concept of "frames" as cognitive structures that people use to understand and respond to social situations. "Forms of Speech" (1981): Collection of essays that explore verbal and nonverbal communication, and how different forms of speech structure social interactions.

Goffman (2011) approaches social interactions through an ethnographic analysis, emphasizing the importance of observing, listening and understanding what happens around us. He argues that the focus of the study should not be on the individual and his or her psychology, but on the relationships that form between people who are mutually present. With a keen eye and a sense of irony, Goffman unraveled many of the assumptions we have about ourselves and others around us.

Goffman (1959) did not write directly about education, but his sociological theories and analyses can be applied to the educational field, especially with regard to social interaction in classrooms and educational institutions. In the school environment, the ideas of "social interaction as a performance" that the author describes can be applied to the behavior of teachers and students, which they perform according to the expectations of social roles - the teacher as mediator and transmitter of knowledge and students as receptors who must show involvement and interest in the classes.

From another perspective, Pierre Bourdieu, born in 1930 and died in 2002, recognized as one of the most prominent sociologists of the twentieth century, who adopts a more structural and macrosociological approach, left a deep mark on the sociology of education and great influence. Of French and peasant origin, he graduated in philosophy and his contributions are focused on the areas of knowledge, including anthropology, sociology and education. In addition to being a researcher, he worked as a university professor in France, the United States and England.

Among the main intellectuals who marked his intellectual trajectory are: (1) Karl Marx, from whom Bourdieu adopted the concept of "capital", but expanded it beyond the economic, creating the notions of cultural, social and symbolic capital. He was also influenced by the idea of class struggle, adapting it to reflect struggles for symbolic and cultural power; (2) Max Weber, in his theory of power and domination, influenced Bourdieu, especially in his analysis of symbolic power and forms of legitimation; (3) Émile Durkheim contributed with his focus on the importance of social structures and their functions was also an important influence on Bourdieu, who was concerned with understanding how institutions perpetuate social inequalities; (4) Claude Lévi-Strauss in his structuralist anthropology influenced Bourdieu, who absorbed the idea that invisible social structures shape human actions, even though Bourdieu criticized structuralism for neglecting individual agency; (5) Jean-Paul Sartre and existentialism, especially the notion of individual freedom and the concept of practice, influenced Bourdieu, although he criticized the extreme individualism of existentialism, opting for an approach that balanced structure and agency; (6) And Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his phenomenology focused on lived experience and body perception, impacted Bourdieu's understanding of how individuals internalize social practices through habitus. (Thomé and Ferreira (2019)⁹element.

⁹ THOMÉ, Elias; FERREIRA, Luciana (eds.). Bourdieu and Brazilian Sociology: Theory and Practice. São Paulo: Editora Unesp, 2019.

His ideas and theories encompass a diversity of concepts that are still fundamental to understanding social and educational dynamics today. According to Nogueira and Nogueira (2002), from the 1960s onwards Bourdieu formulated an original and comprehensive, theoretically and empirically grounded response to the problem of school inequalities, becoming a milestone in the Sociology of Education and in global educational thought. Until the middle of the twentieth century, an optimistic and functionalist view prevailed, which attributed to education a central role in overcoming social inequality, economic backwardness, authoritarianism and the privileges of traditional societies. It was hoped that a free public school would solve the problem of access to education, guaranteeing, in principle, equal opportunities for all. In this view, the school would be a neutral institution, which would transmit knowledge objectively and select its students based on rational criteria, allowing the most talented to advance and occupy superior positions in society, promoting a fair, meritocratic, modern and democratic society.

[...] The 1960s marked the arrival of the first generation of secondary education and university, benefiting from the strong expansion of the educational system in the post-war period. This generation, regimented in broader sectors than those of the traditional educated elites, sees – in part, the devaluation of school titles that accompanied the massification of education – frustrated their expectations of social mobility through school. The disappointment of this "deceived generation", as Bourdieu says, fueled a fierce criticism of the educational system and contributed to the outbreak of the broad movement of social protest in 1968 (Nogueira and Nogueira, 2002, p:17).

To demonstrate the process of reproduction of social structures through the school, Bourdieu elaborates a typology with three categories of capital - economic capital, cultural capital, symbolic capital. According to Bourdieu (2007), economic capital refers to the financial and material resources that a person has. Cultural capital, on the other hand, is the intellectual and cultural qualifications acquired through education and family, and can be subdivided into three categories: incorporated (personal skills and competences), objectified (cultural goods such as books and works of art) and institutionalized (diplomas and academic titles). Social capital is the network of social relationships and connections that a person has. Symbolic power includes prestige, honor, and social recognition. Education, rather than being seen as an agent of social transformation, is often a field where inequalities are reified, reinforcing an existing social structure that favors those from higher social classes. Bourdieu (2007) presents a profound critique of the function of

education in society, challenging the idea that it is a space of social mobility and democratization.

[...] for Bourdieu, the concept of habitus constitutes the central axis, and its understanding is fundamental for the exploration of issues involving the production, dissemination and appropriation of knowledge from a critical theoretical and methodological perspective, which presupposes not a kind of adherence to the author's ideas, but a commitment to reflection based on the study of contexts and practices of social actors. In view of these first demarcations, it is worth asking from which contexts and issues theoretical and methodological paths are constructed in the sociologist's work for the study of the social conditions of production of culture, knowledge and information (Marteleto, 2017, p. 31).

The concept of habitus for Bourdieu, apud Marteleto (2017), is fundamental to understand how social practices are structured and reproduced. Habitus can be understood as a set of internalized dispositions that guide the behavior and perceptions of individuals within a specific social field. It is shaped by the social conditions in which the individual is embedded, but it also actively influences the way individuals interpret and respond to the world around them. Understanding habitus is essential to critically explore the production and appropriation of knowledge, culture and information, it not only shapes how individuals act, but also how they think about and perceive the world, directly influencing the way knowledge is produced and disseminated.

According to Bourdieu (1980), apud Marteleto (2017) [...] against positivist materialism, the theory of practice, as practice, reminds us that the objects of knowledge are constructed, and not passively registered, and, against intellectualist idealism, that the principle of this construction is the system of structured and structuring dispositions that is constituted in practice and that is always oriented towards practical functions.

Bourdieu's contribution from the 1960s onwards became a point of reference in Education and influenced educational thought and practice around the world. Until the twentieth century, the Social Sciences, influenced by functionalism, saw education as a means to overcome economic and social problems, believing in the ability of a free public school to guarantee equal opportunities. In this context, the school was considered a neutral institution that would provide fair conditions for citizens to compete, allowing the most talented to ascend socially by merit. Thus, education should select students based on individual criteria, promoting a meritocracy.

From the perspective of Bourdieu, (1980) apud Marteleto (2017), cultural capital is one of the main factors that explain the reproduction of social inequalities through education. As we stated earlier, cultural capital refers to a set of knowledge, skills, values

and dispositions, acquired mainly in the family environment and which are valued and recognized in educational institutions. It manifests itself in three ways:

Table 1 – Bourdieu's three forms of cultural capital

Incorporated	It refers to the knowledge, skills, dispositions and ways of acting and thinking that a person acquires throughout his life, especially during the socialization process, since childhood. This type of cultural capital cannot be transmitted directly or bought, but is gradually internalized through family life, education, and interaction with the social environment. It manifests itself, for example, in the mastery of language, posture, cultural tastes and lifestyle. Because it is incorporated, it is long-lasting and tends to influence the way a person relates to the world, their opportunities and their social position.
Objectified	It refers to material goods that have cultural value, such as books, works of art, musical instruments, and other objects that carry cultural knowledge and meanings. These items are concrete forms of cultural capital that can be owned, exchanged, or passed on, but their value lies not only in their possession, but also in the ability to utilize them specifically.
Institutionalized	It refers to the formal recognition of a person's skills and knowledge, usually through diplomas, certificates, and academic titles. This type of cultural capital is conferred by educational institutions (schools, universities) and officially validates the skills acquired throughout school life. Institutionalized cultural capital is recognized by the whole society, which facilitates comparisons and classifications between individuals.

Source: prepared by the authors

Bourdieu (1980) argues that schools tend to value and reward the cultural capital of the more privileged classes, which favors the reproduction of their social position. Students from families with greater cultural capital find it easier to assimilate school content, as what is taught at school is more aligned with what they already experience at home. Thus, education, instead of being a means of social ascension, ends up reinforcing existing inequalities, as those with less cultural capital, generally from less favored classes, find more obstacles to progress.

ERVING GOFFMAN AND PIERRE BOURDIEU'S PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL INTERACTION

Goffman (1974) apud Bodart (2014), emphasizes the relevance of a microsociological approach, centered on face-to-face interactions, stating that the micro level does not determine the macro level in relation to broader social structures, nor does

the opposite occur; Instead, there is an interconnection between these two dimensions, where coexistence is profoundly influenced by broader social structures, which are constantly reproduced and legitimized. However, an individual's willingness to participate in social interaction depends on factors that go beyond the personal sphere, being related to the context and environment in which it occurs. In the analysis of these microstructures (frames), the idea of structure seems to be limited to a very specific place, such as a room, a university, an auditorium.

In turn, Bourdieu (1989) focuses on a structural analysis of social relations, therefore of a macrosociological nature, with the help of concepts such as habitus, capital and field. Habitus influences how we see and react to the world, ensuring cultural and social continuity, while capital contributes to an individual's position in the social field and can be converted, to some extent, into privilege for the individual in society. The countryside, on the other hand, is a relatively autonomous social space, where individuals and groups compete for different forms of capital. Bourdieu (1989) uses the metaphor of play to describe how social fields work - each field has its own rules, actors, forms of valued capital, and internal struggles. In this way, we perceive different fields in society, such as the artistic field, the academic field, the political field, among others, where participants have different levels of competence and resources, and positions of power are disputed according to the implicit rules of the field.

Goffman (1959) and Bourdieu (1989) are dedicated to understanding how the social interactions that shape the behavior of individuals in public activities is a progression of exposures where people act in various roles to make positive impressions.

According to Lopes (2009), Goffman and Bourdieu criticize functionalism and radical structuralism because both paradigms end up simplifying human behavior, treating the actions of individuals as a direct result of rigid and fixed structures. For Goffman (1959), social interactions are dynamic and situational, which is why he criticizes those paradigms because he believes that they treat the social world as if it were a fixed thing, an immutable object that does not consider the complexity and variability of human behavior, and each person plays a "role" according to the specific context. Society cannot be reduced to stable or predictable structures, since the action of individuals is influenced by the immediate social situation. Bourdieu (1996), in turn, argues that, although there are social structures, social agents are not passive, they have the capacity to act and transform the conditions that surround them. According to the author, individuals have internalized dispositions that

guide their actions, but they are also capable of innovating and responding to circumstances in ways not entirely determined by the social structure. Thus, both Goffman (1959) and Bourdieu (1996) defend a less deterministic and more complex view of how people act and interact in society.

According to Silva (2013), an important point to understand Bourdieu's theory is his criticism of subjectivism and objectivism. Subjectivism argues that our actions are delimited by immediate experiences and individual preferences, giving great autonomy to the subject, that is, this perspective gives excessive emphasis to individual representations, choices and actions. Bourdieu (1989) criticizes this view, arguing that it overestimates the consciousness and autonomy of individuals. He points out its limitations by stating that this view does not take into account the objective conditions that influence subjective experience, however it attributes to individuals an autonomy and an exaggerated awareness in relation to their actions and social interactions. On the other hand, objectivism proposes that our actions are subordinate to social structures, which determine our behavior. Bourdieu (1989) apud Silva (2013), criticizes objectivism pointing out that this perspective does not adequately explain how social structures influence individual actions.

Goffman (1959), on the other hand, understands that the subject, in his social interactions, acts subjectively by shaping and controlling his presentations. However, these actions do not occur in a vacuum, they are framed by objective social norms and expectations that influence how individuals should behave. Thus, Goffman's theory (1959) recognizes both individual action (subjectivism) and the regulating social structures (objectivism) that guide the individual's social interactions.

As an example, Bourdieu (1979), through his research, seeks to demonstrate how cultural taste is linked to class structures and how cultural practices serve to distinguish, reproduce inequalities, reinforce social hierarchies and that aesthetic and cultural preferences (such as the taste for certain types of art, music, literature, etc.) are not only individual, but profoundly conditioned by the social position of the individual. He points out how cultural patterns are perpetuated by classification systems and how individuals use taste for social distinction, applying a methodology that combines empirical research and sociological theory. Goffman (1959) offers an explanation of how cultural practices influence social interaction based on the idea of "performances" that people perform on a daily basis playing roles, as if they were acting on a stage, in a process that he called "staging" or "representation". These performances are guided by cultural norms and expectations that

define how one should behave in different social contexts. Cultural expectations They function as "scripts" that individuals follow when relating to others. These "scripts" vary according to the social situation and the group to which they belong, and shape the way people express who they are or how they want to be perceived.

The pleasure or displeasure that a social encounter generates for an individual, and the affection or hostility he feels for the participants, may have more than one relation to his composure or lack thereof. Praise, acclamations, and sudden rewards can put the receiver in a state of joyful confusion, while a heated argument can be provoked and maintained with the individual feeling composed and in total control of themselves at all times (Goffman, 2011, p. 99, apud Aguiar, 2021, p. 3).

Goffman (2011), referenced in the quote above, reveals a depth in the way he understands social interactions. He recognizes that emotions and feelings during social encounters are shaped by a varied set of factors, including cultural expectations, social norms, and one's own internal emotional reactions. The ability of individuals to maintain composure, even in challenging situations, demonstrates the crucial role that self-control and emotional management play in relationships. However, Goffman (2011) also suggests that feelings of pleasure or displeasure are not necessarily a direct reflection of the loss or maintenance of composure, but rather complex responses to the dynamic nature of social interactions.

Both Bourdieu and Goffman show us that individual action is not totally autonomous, nor completely determined by external factors. Bourdieu focuses on the social forces and structures that influence people's behavior, such as class, culture, and power, which limit or guide their choices. Goffman, in turn, emphasizes how individuals, within these limitations, adjust their attitudes and behaviors to control how they are perceived by others in specific interactions. Thus, the actions of individuals are shaped by social rules, but also adapted to the situations of the moment.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The theories of Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu offer complementary perspectives for understanding education. Goffman, with his approach focused on everyday social interactions and "social dramaturgy", allows a detailed analysis of how teachers and students play social roles within educational institutions. His microsociology reveals how social expectations and norms shape school dynamics. On the other hand, Bourdieu offers a broader view, highlighting the structural inequalities present in education, where habitus,

economic, cultural and social capital influence opportunities and school success. His criticism of the idea that the school is an agent of social mobility highlights how, in practice, it can perpetuate inequalities. By integrating these perspectives, it is possible to have a comprehensive analysis of the interactions and structures that shape education, both at the individual level and in social structures.

Goffman's and Bourdieu's theories also offer complementary perspectives on social interaction, by addressing different levels of analysis. Goffman, with his microsociological approach, highlights the centrality of face-to-face interactions, where individuals perform "performances" to influence the perceptions of others, adjusting to social expectations. He understands that human actions are dynamic and situational, emphasizing the importance of cultural "scripts" that guide how people behave in specific contexts, but recognizing the individual's agency in shaping their presentations.

On the other hand, Bourdieu offers a macrosociological, more structured view, centered on concepts such as habitus, capital, and field, which explain how cultural and social practices are profoundly influenced by class structures and the symbolic and material resources available. For him, the actions of individuals are largely shaped by these structures, but social agents also have the ability to innovate and transform their surroundings. The metaphor of the "game" applied by Bourdieu illustrates how individuals compete for different forms of capital in social fields, where rules and values vary according to the context.

Both authors share the critique of structuralist and functionalist determinism, stressing that human action cannot be reduced to mere automatic responses to social structures. However, they diverge in emphasis: Goffman explores individual control in immediate interaction, while Bourdieu focuses on the broader social forces that shape behavior. In summary, social interaction, under the lens of Goffman and Bourdieu, is a complex process that results both from social norms and from the ability of individuals to act within structural conditions, adjusting to situational and contextual demands.

The appropriateness of each approach depends on the circumstance and the objectives of the research. Goffman's analysis is the most appropriate to focus on regular interactions and impression management in specific environments, where detailed perception of the individual mode of behavior is critical. On the other hand, Bourdieu's approach is best for analyses that require a deep understanding of social structures, power

dynamics, and systemic imbalances, and is especially useful in investigations of public policy, education, and economic and cultural inequality.

By integrating the contributions of Goffman and Bourdieu, researchers can gain a broader understanding of social interactions and structures. The use of the set of these theories allows for an analysis that considers both the details of everyday interactions, as explored by Goffman, and the broader structural forces that influence these interactions, highlighted by Bourdieu. This combined approach offers important knowledge for strategy formulation, social mediation, and understanding social dynamics. Perceiving the strengths and impediments of each approach considers a more vigorous use of sociological theories.

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