

Internalized Constraints: Bourdieu's Habitus in Normal People

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Abstract

In sociology, habitus is the way that people perceive and respond to the social world they inhabit through their personal habits, skills, and character disposition. Bourdieu's theory is a sociological perspective of classes and its influence on culture across different aspects, such as predispositions, perceptions, tendencies, tastes, and lifestyles. Lifestyle is a product of the habitus which classifies different symbols in a specific hierarchy. Normal People by Sally Rooney is one book that illustrates the effects of habitus and the dynamic role it plays in interpersonal relationships and social interactions. Using Bourdieu's theory as a lens to study this novel brings out the subtle play of social dynamics in human relationships. The novel explores the romantic relationship between Marianne and Connell as it develops from their high school days. Their relationships are hindered by their differences, although they find each other very likeable. Their social standing becomes a reason to drive a wedge between them, even though neither cares for it. Connell seems to be constantly dragged back by his social background despite expanding his horizons and discovering new things. His standing among his university peers differs significantly from that of his school, making him feel exposed and insecure. He also faces trouble in his relationship with Marianne as he tries to traverse through their inequalities. His affectation through his social standing offers insight into the significance of habitus in one's life. Every defining aspect of his lifestyle, such as his personal style and social skills, to name a couple, is defined by his economic status which characterizes his habit. This study intends to analyse how Connell is affected by his social background, and as a result, finds himself at unease positioning himself amidst his peers, who are of a different social standing, with reference to Bourdieu's theory.

Keywords: Habitus, Lifestyle, Social Differences, Perception, Taste, Social Interactions

Introduction

Habitus is a concept proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, in his book *Distinction*. It can be defined as what determines our identity, our interactions with the world, and the things we learn from our social networks and living situations. These factors ultimately determine the preferences, perceptions, and opportunities afforded.

Normal People is the second novel by Sally Rooney, an Irish author, published in 2018. It explores love in contemporary times across class divides by illustrating the relationship between the Marianne Sherridan and Connell Waldron. Their relationships are complicated because of their habitual behaviour, which is shaped by social differences. His reputation preceded him because of his family's history, which included his uncle's criminal records and her mother's pregnancy at the age of seventeen, for which she dropped out of high school. Connell Waldron excelled in academics, athletics, appearance, etiquette, and charms. In this way, he departs from his tarnished background, establishing himself as being “nothing like a Waldron” (Rooney 32).

Theoretical Framework

Pierre Bourdieu integrated the ideas of habitus, social capital, cultural capital, and field in his many of his works, including *Distinctions*. He borrowed ideas from philosophers including Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and Marcel Mauss. The theories formulated thus provided a middle ground during his period, between the humanist ideologies which neglected the societal impact on individual identity and structuralist ideas that did not explore the dynamics brought in by the individual agency.

Habitus by definition is, “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (Bourdieu 53). Various resources like education taste and culture which are non-economic and economic resources like access to high culture and money are attributed to subjects based on their socioeconomic background. All social indicators manifest consciously and unconsciously through the dispositions, inclinations, social interactions, and tastes of the subject. This theory of habitus is used to study Connell’s depiction in the novel.

Analyzing Connell’s Habitus

Matović points out that, aside from placing Connell and Marianne on opposing sides of the wealth divide, *Normal People*’s critique of capitalism has little structural impact because it is primarily performed on a discursive level. He writes that “Marianne is mostly unconcerned about money, except in an abstract sense; Connell’s position in the symbolic fields he moves through is materially conditioned by the lack of wealth. Once he is finally able to afford to travel, to buy experiences, Connell understands how the normative symbol influences material reality, which both disgusts and excites him” (Matović 201).

Lifestyle is determined by a system of practices, perception, and taste shaped by the habitus, which is influenced by one’s conditions of existence. Lifestyles are the byproducts of habitus, which are then “socially qualified (as ‘distinguished’, ‘vulgar’ etc.)” (Bourdieu 172). Lifestyles thus becomes a subconscious determinant of how we perceive and judge people.

Social background

Connell always placed his education and social standing first, as he strived to change his reputation as someone who came from a bad family. He understood that education is the only path to success. He was a popular student who maintained his position at the top of the school’s social hierarchy using his intelligence, charm, and good looks. His desire to maintain this status was paramount, which motivated him to maintain his relationship with Marianne. Marianne was not well liked at school; instead, she was a reclusive outcast who remained a mystery to her classmates. He takes another girl to Debs instead of Marianne because he cannot stand the idea of being ridiculed to take her.

Connell finds himself quiet and unable to voice his opinions, with the same confidence as others, when he transfers to Trinity for college. They expressed themselves with such assurance and assertiveness, despite their lack of thoroughness. The skills to abstract glazes over the topics, without having to get into any minor details, made them sound easy and correct, while he himself struggled to participate in the discussions. Bourdieu throws light on the ability of the bourgeois to adapt to “all situations of polite conversations” (Bourdieu 174), possessing the ability to mask any gaps in knowledge efficiently.

Preferences and Inclinations

In one case, his friend pointed out a girl and said that she might be his type, which he agreed with, demonstrating his particular taste in women. He then realises that this girl resembles Marianne, who was the only one he had ever been in a serious relationship with. Marianne was indisputably a significant figure in his life. His habitus was affected by a certain sense of comfort he had developed toward her. The habitus is internalised and converted into a disposition. In his school, Connell associates himself with a shallow circle, with whom he cannot have meaningful conversations. He was at ease with Marianne, who allowed him to discover aspects of himself that he had never valued. Thus, it is irrefutable that Marianne had a significant impact on his life.

Habitus has also become a structuring tool which classifies people into boxes. The proclivities, tastes,

and dispositions which are true to their lifestyles become indicators of their living conditions and social backgrounds. When Connell moved to college in Dublin, he was immediately identified as an outsider. After evaluating him, they say that he looks at this part. He was perplexed by the critical glances of his peers, and the significance of coming from different regions of Ireland was.

Social Interactions

The other students in his class appeared to have a certain style of wearing gaudy outfits that would make Connell feel like a complete prick. He notes how he differs from his other friends in ways that are not only abstract but also physical. Being not a part of the bourgeoisie circle to which his friends belong, he is embarrassed and uneasy with himself, betraying his position in the hierarchy, even in his unconscious actions. He realised that the ease that his peers possessed was something he lacked. His peers possessed skills to ease through “all situations of polite conversations” (Bourdieu 174) like “skimming and sliding” (Bourdieu 174) through a conversation, “masking” (Bourdieu 174) deficit knowledge of a subject in discussion, using necessary “fillers” (Bourdieu 174) to keep the interaction polished and flowing. Unlike his peers, he was unable to maintain an abstract distance from the subject matter.

Taste as a Product of Social status

The social conditions “transform necessities into strategies and constraints into preferences” (Bourdieu 175), meaning Connell’s criticism of the attires does not only expose his tastes, but also how his tastes were moulded by the selection of articles he could afford. The articles that his peers feel are appropriate and stylish seem flashy. His clothing was functional and meaningful to his area of interest. His shoes, “an ancient pair of Adidas trainers” (Rooney 70), make more sense to him than to say a leather boot, as he could use the same pair as a gym. Being an athlete, he chose clothes that fit his aesthetic, casual, comfortable, and functional qualities. The choice of clothes was not a function of fashion for him; it was about affordability, reality, and substantiality. Thus, tracksuits became his look, which defined him and that is a product of his background of belonging to the

working class, and that also becomes an indicator of the society that he belongs to. His “unadorned silver neckchain” (Rooney 146), defines his taste, a symbol of his, because that was the only chain that he ever wore, most likely owned. His “Argos chic” (Rooney 146) style, was not something he was wilfully going for but it was something which he was rather condemned to. Therefore, taste becomes a forced choice that leaves other alternatives implausible when economic capital comes into play.

Effect of Physical Appearance in Social Hierarchy

Bodily properties, such as beauty, are distributed irrespective of the social hierarchy which threatens hegemony. People of classes placed lower by society may be blessed with such an undeniable physical advantage that becomes leverage for their social mobility. At the same time, this threatens members of the higher classes who may not possess the same edge. Connell had charm and good looks, with optimal height, physical fitness, intelligence, and charm. All of these factors have made him popular among women. However, he did not warm up with his male peers, who criticised his unfair popularity. He was the student with the highest grade in the year, which was acknowledged by his peers. With his cultural capital, he created a new elite position amidst his society, even if he could not equate with his fellows economically. His abundance of cultural capital in his possession gave him opportunities that he could not have normally had, let him navigate through circles more sophisticated than his own, and gain a sense of prestige and respect. However, not possessing economic capital meant that he felt out of place as an imposter, which impacted his confidence in leveraging his intelligence to its maximum advantage.

Varied Perceptions Resulting from Economic Differences

Trinity scholarship meant two completely different things for Marianne and Connell. While this was an ego boost for the former, it meant independence for the latter. It meant freedom, the divine opportunity to pursue what he wants to, to live in a city without worrying about finance. Their social class has a significant impact on their perception of things. It was only then revealed to Connell that “money, the

substance ... makes the world real” (Rooney 160). He came along to experience a lifestyle so different that it bordered on being antagonistic, firmly insisting upon the denial of the social world around them. This new world indulged in abstract aestheticism and was characterised by an absolute sense of ease.

Play of Agency

Individuals actively shape their lifestyles and individuality by interacting with society. These factors are independent of their identity, which is predetermined by their socioeconomic status. Connell strives to escape the identity of his notorious family by actively pursuing educational feats that merit him with a reputable image amidst his peers. He participates in elite cultural discussions and engages in high-art culture through the connections he makes in Dublin. This exercise of agency allows him to evade social hierarchies to a certain extent and enables mobility through the strata.

Summing Up

In conclusion, the Habitus Theory, as conceptualised by Bourdieu, provides a powerful lens for understanding how social structures shape individual dispositions, behaviours, and life chances. While studying the novel, it becomes evident that habitus and lifestyle are integral parts of a social relationship, as much as one may deny its role.

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protagonists of the novel are constantly reminded of their class differences once they move out of school, which is a rather narrow space for all dynamics to really come into play. Ghassani et al., comments how “Towards the end of the novel, they both have grown so much in the way they see gender and class within themselves, causing them to no longer feel the way they feel at the beginning of the novel” (2). Ultimately, recognising the influence of habitus challenges us to reflect on the constraints of social positioning, while also acknowledging the potential for transformation through education, relationships, and personal agency.

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