

Symbolic Violence in the Workplace and the Production of Job Unhappiness An Analytical Sociological Approach

Dr. Badra Bioud

Researcher in the Sociology of Communication,
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Mascara, Algeria

Email: badra.bioud@univ-mascara.dz

Received : 21/04/2026 ; Accepted : 25/08/2026 ; Published : 23/09/2026

Abstract

This study examines job unhappiness as a sociological phenomenon in which psychological, social, organizational, and economic dimensions intersect. The analysis begins by defining the concept and distinguishing it from related notions such as job satisfaction, job burnout, and job alienation. The suffering of individuals within contemporary organizations is no longer a marginal issue in sociological research. It has become a key entry point for understanding the profound transformations affecting the world of work. This occurs under the dominance of the bureaucratic model and the expansion of managerial logic. This logic has extended into areas that were not previously governed by standards of efficiency and productivity. From this perspective, feelings of distress, meaninglessness, and the depletion of psychological energy at work give rise to what is termed psychological unhappiness. This condition is not an isolated individual phenomenon. Nor is it merely the result of poor psychological adjustment, as purely clinical approaches tend to suggest. From a sociological perspective, it is the product of relations of power and domination. These relations are produced and reproduced within specific organizational structures. Using an analytical sociological approach, this study assumes that a substantial part of this unhappiness cannot be understood separately from the concept of symbolic violence. This concept explains how such suffering enters institutions and becomes deeply rooted within them.

Keywords: symbolic violence; alienation; field; habitus; symbolic capital; job unhappiness.

Introduction

The suffering of individuals within contemporary organizations is no longer a marginal topic in sociological research. It has become a key entry point for understanding the profound transformations that have affected the world of work. These transformations have unfolded under the dominance of the administrative-bureaucratic model and the expansion of managerial logic (gestion) into areas that were not previously governed by criteria of efficiency and productivity.

Job unhappiness refers here to a subjective feeling of distress, meaninglessness, and the depletion of psychological energy. It is not an isolated individual phenomenon. Nor is it simply the result of poor psychological adjustment, as strictly clinical approaches often suggest. From a sociological perspective,

it is a product of relations of power and domination that are produced and reproduced within specific organizational structures.

This study assumes that a substantial part of such unhappiness cannot be understood independently of the concept of symbolic violence as developed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Symbolic violence is not exercised through direct physical coercion. Instead, it operates through subtle and invisible mechanisms. These mechanisms lead dominated individuals, without full awareness, to participate in legitimizing the domination exercised over them (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970, p. 18). This approach therefore moves beyond individualistic psychological explanations of job unhappiness. It places the phenomenon within its structural context as an effect of power relations inside the organizational field.

1. Pierre Bourdieu's Concept of Symbolic Violence

The concept of symbolic violence is closely associated with the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. His arguments on this concept became prominent from 1972 onward, and symbolic violence became a central concept in the sociology of domination and power. Bourdieu defined it as a form of violence exercised in a subtle and imperceptible manner through channels of communication and meaning. The dominated person participates, without being fully aware of it, in constructing the legitimacy of the domination imposed upon him or her. It is a form of violence that is “exercised with the implicit consent of its victim” (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 214). Bourdieu also argues that every pedagogical action is, objectively, an act of symbolic violence insofar as it uses arbitrary authority to impose a particular cultural meaning as the only legitimate meaning (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970, p. 18). By analogy, the same logic applies to organizational action when it imposes a particular conception of competence, discipline, and institutional loyalty as the only possible standard.

What distinguishes symbolic violence from direct physical violence is its hidden character. It may remain unrecognized by both those who exercise it and those who are subjected to it. It uses symbolic instruments such as language, images, signs, and meanings to impose a particular view of the social world as natural and self-evident (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 243). This makes symbolic violence more effective than physical violence in reproducing domination because it does not provoke conscious resistance from those who are subjected to it.

Unlike forms of violence based on physical coercion, symbolic violence is subtle and concealed. It does not depend on direct material force. In its operation, it resembles rituals of magic that penetrate consciousness. This feature distinguishes it fundamentally from explicit forms of physical oppression.

2. Field, Habitus, and Symbolic Capital

These three concepts constitute the central analytical tools of Bourdieu's sociology. The field (champ) is a structured space of objective relations among positions. The value of actors within it is determined by the volume of capital they possess, whether economic, cultural, social, or symbolic.

Habitus is a system of durable, acquired, and transposable dispositions. It leads individuals to act “spontaneously” according to the logic of the field in which they operate, without the need for explicit rules to be imposed on them (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 219). If habitus represents embodied subjectivity, the field represents objectivity embodied in social space. The field is not a neutral environment. It is an open

arena of struggle in which actors compete for specific forms of capital, including economic, cultural, and social capital. Each field, such as the artistic, academic, or political field, has its own rules and specific stakes.

The core of symbolic domination inside organizations lies in the way professional habitus leads employees to internalize standards of evaluation and discipline as natural and desirable. Employees then reproduce these standards upon themselves and their colleagues without recognizing their coercive dimension. In this process, symbolic capital, such as reputation and senior administrative positions, becomes an instrument of hierarchy. It legitimizes inequalities within the field and transforms power relations into relations of meaning that appear natural and acceptable.

Bourdieu's conceptual triad is not merely an explanatory theory. It is also a method for revealing the "mechanisms that conceal power." For Bourdieu, the social is a complex dance between past structures embodied within us as habitus, present objective structures around us as the field, and mechanisms of consecration that make power appear as virtue through symbolic capital. This analysis shows that class inequalities do not require violent repression in order to persist. They require only the reproduction of "second natures," or habitus, that correspond to their positions. They also require a legitimate distribution of recognition that conceals the original disorder of struggle. Sociology thus becomes, in Bourdieu's work, a critical instrument par excellence. It enables us to expose the nature of things and to turn familiar self-evidences into questions that can be changed.

3. From Weberian Rationalization to Foucauldian Discipline

Max Weber's thesis on bureaucracy as the most rational form of rational-legal authority provided a major starting point for understanding modern organizations. Yet Weber also pointed to the paradox contained within this rationalization. The bureaucratic instrument may become an "iron cage" that closes around the individual and strips away much of the space for personal initiative.

Michel Foucault went further in *Discipline and Punish*. He showed how disciplinary power moves from visible corporal punishment to precise techniques of surveillance. These techniques lead individuals to monitor themselves. The person thus becomes a "jailer of the self" within an institution that no longer needs to rely on direct physical violence (Foucault, 1975).

Foucault and Bourdieu converge in the central importance they assign to invisible mechanisms of power that operate through the body, discourse, and language. Bourdieu, however, adds a decisive dimension: the structural and class-based character of this violence. In other words, symbolic violence is connected to the unequal distribution of capital among social actors. This makes Bourdieu's approach more capable of explaining inequalities within a single organizational field.

An analytical approach that brings together Weberian rationalization, Foucauldian discipline, and Bourdieu's symbolic violence reveals a complex picture of the contemporary workplace. What appears on the surface to be a neutral space for economic exchange and production is, at a deeper level, a field of struggle. Legitimacy and recognition are continually reformulated within it, while social differences are inscribed in a professional language that appears rational and neutral.

In this sense, the institution is not simply an apparatus for coordinating work. It is also a space in which relations of power, domination, and authority are reproduced. These relations cannot be

understood only as administrative relations governed by legal texts. They also form a symbolic and cultural structure that reshapes consciousness and practice.

Revealing these mechanisms is not an end in itself. It is a necessary step toward freeing actors from the domination of invisible structures and enabling them to recover meaning and dignity in the workplace. As Foucault noted, where there is power, there is resistance. Bourdieu likewise stressed that exposing the mechanisms of symbolic violence is the first condition for moving beyond them.

Within this critical perspective, sociology remains indispensable for understanding and dismantling the mechanisms that produce job unhappiness. It also helps restore work as a space of achievement and recognition rather than domination and subjection.

4. The Concept of Job Unhappiness

Job unhappiness refers to a chronic psychosocial state of discomfort toward work. Based on the readings consulted in this study, it results from administrative practices and policies that lack fairness and recognition. These include denying employees sufficient authority, marginalizing their role, disregarding their contributions, and keeping them apart from their institution's decisions and new developments. This condition differs from temporary frustration or distress in its persistence and cumulative nature. It is also linked to the structure of the relationship between the individual and the institution rather than to a passing situation. The concept of job unhappiness intersects with three important sociological concepts in the field of work studies:

a. Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is one of the most important indicators of organizational health. It is a positive affective state that results from an individual's evaluation of his or her work and professional conditions (Ayoub Nawar, 2024, p. 15). Job unhappiness is, in essence, the counterpart of reduced job satisfaction. Lower job satisfaction is associated with increasing signs of discontent and complaint among employees.

b. Job Burnout

Job burnout is a state of emotional, physical, and psychological exhaustion caused by continuous exposure to work pressures. It is expressed through three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of achievement (Ubaid Ahmad et al., 2022, p. 27). Job unhappiness is often a preliminary or accompanying stage of burnout. The accumulation of dissatisfaction and lack of recognition gradually drains the individual's psychological energy.

c. Job Alienation

In its sociological roots, job alienation refers to the worker's sense of separation from work, from the product of work, and from the self. Work then becomes an activity imposed from outside the individual's will rather than a means of self-realization. Job unhappiness and alienation overlap because both express a disturbed relationship between the individual and the structure of work. Job unhappiness is more closely connected to the everyday affective dimension. Alienation, by contrast, relates to a deeper structural dimension that affects the meaning of work itself.

5. Sociological Approaches to Explaining Job Unhappiness

Job unhappiness can be explained sociologically through several complementary theoretical approaches:

a. The Structural-Functionalist Approach

This approach views the institution as an integrated social system in which roles and functions are distributed in a coordinated manner that ensures the stability of the system as a whole. When this coordination is disrupted, for example when an individual is prevented from performing a role or is marginalized within the system, a form of dysfunction emerges. At the individual level, this dysfunction may be expressed through feelings of unhappiness and lack of belonging.

b. The Alienation Approach

This approach has its roots in the social analysis of labor relations. It connects the organization of work and the distribution of authority within the institution, on the one hand, with workers' feelings of powerlessness, normlessness, and social isolation, on the other. It therefore explains an important part of job unhappiness that results from the absence of participation in decision-making.

c. The Psychosocial Stress Approach

This approach focuses on the interaction between work demands and the psychological and social resources available to the individual. When pressures such as role ambiguity, role conflict, and a heavy workload exceed the individual's ability to adapt, chronic tension develops. This tension can produce job unhappiness and may eventually develop into full burnout.

6. The Sociology of Suffering at Work: From Alienation to Organizational Misery

While Marx laid the theoretical foundation for the concept of alienation by describing the worker's separation from the product of labor and from the human self under capitalist relations of production, contemporary sociology of work has developed more precise tools for understanding forms of suffering within post-industrial organizations. Christophe Dejours showed that the actual organization of work often conflicts with the formal organization imposed by management. This contradiction produces deep psychological suffering. The individual is compelled to suppress this suffering or transform it into individual and collective defensive strategies in order to avoid psychological collapse under the demands of work. Vincent de Gaulejac, for his part, developed the concept of the "society made ill by management." He showed how managerial ideology (*idéologie gestionnaire*) imposes a normative model of performance and productivity that turns into a form of institutional "social harassment." The individual is required to become fully engaged in the goals of the institution, while his or her position within it remains fragile and replaceable.

In the same context, Danièle Linhar shows how modern management dismantles collective bonds among workers through a discourse of "individual excellence" and the "personal project." This process produces symbolic isolation and deepens feelings of unhappiness, despite the discourse of "well-being at work" promoted by organizations.

Arlie Hochschild's contribution on "emotional labor" adds another dimension. Employees are required to manage their emotions and display them in standardized ways that serve the image of the institution. This produces an additional form of alienation from the self because emotion itself becomes a commodity that is managed and measured according to performance standards. This argument intersects with the concept of symbolic violence. It reveals how the emotional and cognitive

internalization of institutional norms becomes a central mechanism for reproducing domination. The individual may thus become an unwitting participant in producing his or her own unhappiness.

References

1. Ayoub Nawar Suhail. (2024). "Factors Affecting Job Satisfaction and Employee Job Performance: A Sociological Study." *Al-Furat University Journal for Research and Scientific Studies*.
1. Bourdieu, P. (1970). *Méditation pascaliennes. L'homme: Revue française d'anthropologie*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit.
2. Bourdieu, P. (1997). *Réponses pour une anthropologie réflexive*. Paris: Seuil.
3. Bourdieu, Pierre, & Passeron, Jean-Claude. (1970). *La reproduction: Éléments pour une théorie du système d'enseignement*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit.
2. Bourdieu, Pierre, & Passeron, Jean-Claude. (1994). *Reproduction: Elements for a Theory of the Educational System* (translated version of *La reproduction*, 1970). Beirut: National Center for Translation.
3. Bourdieu, Pierre. (1980). *The Practical Sense* (translated from *Le sens pratique*). Paris: Éditions de Minuit.
4. Fayyad, Hossam Eddin. (2016). "Symbolic Violence." *Al-Jadid Magazine*.
4. Foucault, M. (1975). *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*. Gallimard.
5. Ubaid Ahmad Hadi, Bahr Maysam Riyad, & Nu'man Areej Taher. (2022). "The Relationship Between Organizational Climate and Job Burnout: The Mediating Role of Administrative Empowerment." *Al-Ghari Journal of Economic and Administrative Sciences*.