

Elites in Sustainability Research: A Bourdieusan Study of Editorials

Marco Schirone

University of Borås

In modern social systems, the profession of the scientist represents “expert labor” and is one of the elite occupations to which society grants a high status (Abbott, 1988). The reward system of science itself involves mechanisms—such as prestigious prizes and career incentives—which reinforce the formation of “elites within the elite,” such as Nobel Prize winners or the “prestige elite” of highly cited authors (Korom, 2020). Robert K. Merton (1968) famously thematized Matthew’s effect, a dynamic of elite formation through which more financial resources and prestige are accrued by those scientists who have already successfully secured them. As recently found (Schirone, 2023), research in quantitative science studies has combined the Mertonian sociology of science with the viewpoint of Pierre Bourdieu, another central figure in the scholarship on elites. For Bourdieu (2004), scientific elites are groups of agents who occupy a power position in a research field because of their capital. This latter concept applies to various types of resources besides economic capital: information and knowledge (cultural capital), networks of acquaintance and collaboration (social capital), and legitimation as a member of the group with a corresponding degree of prestige in the field (symbolic capital).

This research-in-progress paper applies Bourdieu’s perspective on social stratification in science to one specific “elite within the elite,” the authors of journal editorials. In a scientific journal, an editorial is a type of text that presents the views, opinions, or commentary of the journal’s editorial board, editor-in-chief, or invited guest editors—all of whom are social agents imbued with high symbolic, social, and cultural capital, although to different degrees. Therefore, texts written by such experts can serve the purpose of identifying how the elites’ writings

shape the development of scientific fields. Research on this type of text has been deemed as limited (Hellsten & Leydesdorff, 2016), even if there have been some subsequent additions to the literature (Hulme et al., 2018). Earlier research by Waaiker et al. (2011) has found that science policy and science organization were among the key topical areas for this type of document, which also support the choice to study the elites’ role in shaping science by studying editorials. Moreover, such texts typically focus on current issues, developments, or controversies in the area of study covered by the journal. As editorials convey their authors’ theoretical and methodological viewpoints, such texts are—to use Bourdieusan categories—“symbolic goods,” which unveil the strategies of “position-taking” of those who write them (Bourdieu, 1985; on position-taking, see also Denord et al., 2020). In this present study, the growing field of sustainability science is chosen for an analysis of scientific elites that hinges on these less-explored academic texts (Kajikawa et al., 2014). Therefore, to sum up, this research-in-progress paper aims to investigate how the position-taking of this “editorial elite” attempts to shape the formation of this emerging research field in the symbolic market of science.

A corpus of 68 documents was created by manually detecting editorials from three journals in sustainability science: *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, *Sustainable Development*, and *International Journal of Sustainable Development & World Ecology*. Bourdieu’s (1991) viewpoint emphasizes the importance of exploring the historical dimension of the production of scientific knowledge. These journals were thus suitable for this study’s aim because of their longer life in the publication market compared with other periodicals. The

individual paragraphs of the full-texts were coded for quantitative and qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2019) following the segmentation of the textual data according to a formal criterion or the “inherent structure” of the material to be coded (Schreier, 2012, p. 196). Descriptive statistics are used to summarize the quantitative findings, whereas the qualitative findings are synthesized into a typology of position-taking strategies of the elite under study (i.e., the authors of the corpus).

This study’s expected contribution to the scholarship on scientific elites is a Bourdieusan methodology and theoretical framework for using editorials in the study of the elites’ impact on emerging fields. At the time of writing, three main strategies of position-taking have been identified. As noted by Bourdieu (1988), and likewise by Bourdieu-inspired history of science (Gingras, 1991) and more recent literature on the topic of academic disciplines (Hammarfelt, 2020), the formation of disciplinary fields and their elites are interrelated processes.

Therefore, in the content of the present paper, the first strategy has been conceptualized as disciplinary position-taking. This type of position-taking focuses on a scientific field’s social and intellectual organization and the disciplinary status of the science concerned (e.g., monodisciplinary vis-à-vis interdisciplinary).

The second strategy is the temporal position-taking, which targets a research field’s history, its current stage, and the future the authors of editorials envision for it (e.g., the further research suggested and the research agendas promoted).

Several editorials also emphasize issues such as social justice and power asymmetries between the Global North and the Global South. The strategy of position-taking reflected in such texts is addressed in the paper as critical position-taking. This strategy focuses on the issues of power, governance, and the distribution of capital. This type of position-taking involves a meta-dimension: it reflects, in fact, the position of a scientific elite, the editorials’ authors, with regard to power inequalities and the influence of other scientific elites on the sustainability science field.

References

- Abbott, A. (1988). *The system of professions: An essay on the division of expert labor*. University of Chicago Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1985). The market of symbolic goods. *Poetics*, 14(1), 13-44.
[https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-422X\(85\)90003-8](https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-422X(85)90003-8)
- Bourdieu, P. (1988). *Homo academicus* (P. Collier, Trans.). Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). The peculiar history of scientific reason. *Sociological Forum*, 6(1), 3-26.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/bf01112725>
- Bourdieu, P. (2004). *Science of science and reflexivity*. University of Chicago Press.
- Denord, F., Palme, M., & Réau, B. (2020). *Researching elites and power: Theory, methods, analyses*. Springer Nature.
- Gingras, Y. (1991). *Physics and the rise of scientific research in Canada*. McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Hammarfelt, B. (2020). Discipline. *Knowledge Organization*, 47(3), 244-256.
- Hellsten, I., & Leydesdorff, L. (2016). The construction of interdisciplinarity: The development of the knowledge base and programmatic focus of the journal *Climatic Change*, 1977-2013. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 67(9), 2181-2193. <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.23528>
- Hulme, M., Obermeister, N., Randalls, S., & Borie, M. (2018). Framing the challenge of climate change in *Nature and Science* editorials. *Nature Climate Change*, 8(6), 515-521.
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-018-0174-1>
- Kajikawa, Y., Tocoa, F., & Yamaguchi, K. (2014). Sustainability science: The changing landscape of sustainability research. *Sustainability Science*, 9, 431-438.
- Korom, P. (2020). The prestige elite in sociology: Toward a collective biography of the most cited scholars (1970-2010). *Sociological Quarterly*, 61(1).
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00380253.2019.1581037>

Krippendorff, K. (2019). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (4th ed.). SAGE.

Merton, R. K. (1968). The Matthew Effect in Science. *Science*, 159(3810), 56-63.

<https://doi.org/10.1126/science.159.3810.56>

Schirone, M. (2023). Field, Capital, and Habitus: The Impact of Pierre Bourdieu on Bibliometrics.

Quantitative Science Studies, 4(1), 186–208.

https://doi.org/10.1162/qss_a_00232

Schreier, M. (2012). *Qualitative content analysis in practice*. Sage publications.

Waaijer, C. J., van Bochove, C. A., & van Eck, N. J. (2011). On the map: Nature and Science editorials. *Scientometrics*, 86(1), 99-112.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-010-0205-9>