

# Why (not) suicide: *Habitus* in hysteresis and the space of possibles

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**Abstract:** Sociological theory on the phenomenon of suicide continues to rely heavily upon the Durkheimian perspective. Whilst such accounts are valuable additions to the field, engagement with alternative theoretical traditions may likewise be stimulating and provide distinct concepts to delve into the issue. This paper contributes to expanding sociological understanding of suicide by drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's theory, a relatively untapped resource in the study of suicide. I suggest that the concept of hysteresis –a mismatch between embodied and objectified structures– enables an understanding of under what circumstances agents may become vulnerable to suicide. I then theorise how socioeconomic, political, and cultural dynamics may deepen the hysteresis effect and increase the chances that individuals in specific social positions experience it. Finally, I argue that individuals' responses to such distress depend on their space of possibles: the culturally-laden idea of suicide and alternatives to it.

**Keywords:** suicide, critical suicidology, Pierre Bourdieu, hysteresis, Lithuania

## Introduction

Despite a fundamental contribution Durkheim's study on suicide (2002 [1897]) made to the history of sociology, contemporary sociology engages surprisingly little with this phenomenon (Chandler, 2019; Cleary, 2020). Rather, so-called psy- (psychiatric, psychological, psychotherapeutic) approaches to suicide dominate the field (Wray et al., 2011). These tend to

centre around an individual pathology, considering suicide an individual or family issue, and utilising predominantly quantitative methods. Studies focus on quantifiable individual risk factors rather than on an in-depth understanding of contextualised social action. Yet, suicide is a complex, multi-layered issue both of public health (World Health Organization, 2021) and of social justice (Button, 2016; Button and Marsh, 2020; Chandler, 2020a).

Thus, whilst medical disciplines can and do identify many important factors common to individuals who die by suicide, sociology might substantially contribute to the debates by contextualising such factors and deepening an understanding of why some (but not all) of those sharing these factors might become suicidal. Research situated within critical suicidology (Button, 2016; Chandler, 2019; Chandler et al., 2022; Fincham et al., 2011; Mills, 2018) aims to move beyond such individualising/pathologising medical and psychological approaches, and therefore, adds to the abovementioned contextualisation of suicide. In other words, we cannot talk of why and how people die by suicide without also examining its cultural and structural underpinnings, that is, an interplay between processes at the intra-, inter- and supra-individual levels.

Sociological theory that deals with this social phenomenon continues to rely heavily upon the Durkheimian structural perspective and typology of suicide on the basis of too low/too high individual social integration (egoism/altruism) or moral regulation (anomie/fatalism), albeit with some exceptions –see, for example, research employing approaches such as critical phenomenology (Chandler, 2019) or sociological autopsy (Fincham et al., 2011; Mills, 2018). Nevertheless, the former contributions (Abrutyn and Mueller, 2014, 2016, 2018; Mueller and Abrutyn, 2016; Wray et al., 2011) are undoubtedly important additions to the sociology of suicide. They both re-stress the importance of Durkheim's work and convincingly advance his scholarship by incorporating insights from the contemporary sociology of culture, emotions, or social networks.

I in turn aim to contribute to these debates by drawing upon an alternative theoretical tradition, Pierre Bourdieu (1990, 1998, 2000), as well as upon other propositions that engage with his perspective and that consider the concepts of *habitus*, hysteresis, or reflexivity (Decoteau, 2016; Strand and Lizardo, 2017; Vandenberghe, 1999; Wacquant, 2014, 2016). I also employ the suicide-specific literature that aims at unpacking the role of emotions and culture in suicidal distress. Although Bourdieu is amongst the most influential sociological thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whose theory and central concepts –the field, capital, and *habitus*– remain vivid and

extensively employed in sociology and beyond, his theoretical lens has been thus far relatively untapped in the sociological study of suicide.

In what follows, I build upon the underutilised Bourdieusian concept of hysteresis (Strand and Lizardo, 2017), which signals a mismatch or discontinuity between embodied dispositions and objectified structures (Bourdieu, 2000). I argue that the notion of hysteresis, coupled with the Bourdieusian conceptual triad, enables the analysis of suicide as a social action enacted by reflexive agents that are situated in and structured by the social field/space. I consider individuals to be embedded interdependent agents that are neither merely a product of specific social structures nor fully independent decision-making and world-constructing subjects. This helps to escape the objectivism/subjectivism divide and accommodate relational explanations.

In the first two sections of the article, I conceptualise the notions of *habitus* and hysteresis that enable an understanding of under what circumstances agents may become more vulnerable to suicide. I then suggest that socioeconomic, cultural, and political dynamics objectified in the field and embodied in *habitus* may deepen the hysteresis effect and increase the chances that individuals in certain social positions within the field experience it. Finally, I argue that individuals' responses to distress depend on their space of possibles. That is, we should aim at responding not only what-causes-suicide but also what-makes-suicide-possible questions (Abend, 2022). Thus, I consider the cultural idea of suicide, alternatives to it, as well as the role of agency.

To illustrate the utility of the proposed approach, I draw on the case of Lithuania. Although the reported suicide mortality in this post-communist society has considerably decreased over the past decades (from 53 in 1996 to 24 per 100,000 in 2018), it remains the highest rate in the European Union and exceeds more than twice its average (source: Eurostat Statistics). Likewise, substantially more individuals die by suicide in Lithuania than they do in its neighbouring countries with similar cultural and socioeconomic contexts –Estonia, Latvia, or Poland. Hence, Lithuania is of great interest to the sociology of suicide as a pathological or extreme case (Danermark et al., 2002), where cultural and structural generative mechanisms may be most visible.

### ***A habitus in the field***

From a Bourdieusian perspective, the social world is considered relational. That is to say, not only are agents and their positions interdependent, but also the main concepts are understood

in relation to one another. As Vandenberghe (1999, p. 45) puts it, ‘the field is identical to the distribution of capital and the *habitus* is identical to the field, but analysed from a different perspective’. Thus, the *habitus* –deeply embodied, durable, and structured, but also transposable, plural, and flexible propensities to think, act, and feel in determinate ways (Bourdieu, 1990; Wacquant, 2016)– should be understood in the context of the social space or field. The latter is a structure of dominant and dominated positions that is defined by a distribution of capital (economic, social, cultural, and symbolic) and that has its regulative principles or ‘rules of the game’ inculcated in the *habitus*.

The agents are, in turn, situated in a particular place within the social space (the social field as a whole or the specific fields such as the academic, healthcare, or artistic field), which is ‘characterised by the position it occupies relative to other places [...] and the distance [...] that separates it from them’ (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 134). The *habitus* is enacted within and in conjunction with this social space or specific field through agents’ choices, actions, perceptions, or more generally, position-takings. That is, ‘[t]he space of social positions is retranslated into a space of position-takings through the mediation of dispositions’ (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 7).

While the past composition of the field structures the formation of the individual *habitus*, and its present regularities the enactment of *habitus*, the *habitus* itself –through its (in)finite repertoire of position-takings that depends not only upon agents’ social positions but also upon their singular life trajectories– structures the future composition of the field. Thus, both the field and *habitus* are social processes of continuity or transformation rather than static categories, and whilst within the limits of its conditionings, *habitus* embodies creative or generative capacities to act. Decoteau (2016, p. 304) argues that, since the agents ‘are always situated at the *intersection* of multiple fields’ resulting in multiple sets of dispositions demanded by different fields, ‘they are capable of reflexivity’ (which may or may not emerge). The notion of *habitus* is, therefore, a mediating concept that transcends the antinomy between determinism and freedom, mechanism and finalism, the social and the individual (Bourdieu, 1990, 2000; Wacquant, 2016).

Analytically and empirically, three interconnected ‘components’ can be differentiated within *habitus* (Wacquant, 2014): cognitive (perceptions of the world and its functionings), conative (corporeal ‘being’ and capacities), and affective (aspirations and motivations to be in and for the field). The latter entails an investment to the field, an interest in the social game, or *illusio*,

which is ‘that way of *being in* the world, of being occupied by the world’ (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 135). *Illusio* ‘gives “sense” (both meaning and direction) to existence’ (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 207) and motivates practices in the present but is oriented to the future, to the anticipations of forthcoming.

Such a capacity to anticipate forthcoming ‘that present themselves in the very structure of the game’ (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 213), or put differently, to maintain *illusio* is sustained as long as dispositions or structures embodied in the *habitus* are compatible with or pre-adapted to their positions in or objective conditions of the field. There is usually a harmonisation between the field-specific *habitus* and the field, and in turn, agents do not feel or question the *doxa* of the field (the taken for granted). The *habitus* ‘feels at home – “like a fish in the water”’ (Vandenberghe, 1999, p. 49), and tends to generate a range of creative but ‘common-sense’ practices that ‘are likely to be positively sanctioned’ and exclude others that ‘would be negatively sanctioned because they are incompatible with the objective conditions’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 56). However, such homology is sometimes broken, and depending on the extent of this break, hysteresis may emerge.

### **The hysteresis effect**

An integration between dispositions within the *habitus* or between the field and *habitus* is hardly ever perfect, for dispositions acquired over time and in different fields ‘can entail extended and abrupt travel across social space’, and the fields themselves can ‘undergo swift and sweeping change’ (Wacquant, 2014, p. 5). Rarely are the structures –both embodied and objectified– utterly stable, and in turn, *habitus* tends to have ‘its “blips”, critical moments, when it misfires or is out of phase’ (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 162). Generally, agents re-establish the harmonisation by means of adjustments made reflexively or unreflexively to their *habitus* and/or to their social positions in the field. Here, then, lies ‘the principle of the transformation of *habitus*’ (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 149) in relation to new experiences in different fields.

Such ‘blips’ of *habitus* might, however, be more prominent because of the extent of disintegration and/or the significance attributed to it by an agent (Bourdieu, 2000). This mismatch between agents’ expectations or aspirations and their capacities or objective chances for satisfaction in the field may sometimes result in a hiatus (Wacquant, 2016). An agent encounters oneself in a state of hysteresis, where the self-evidence of practices and of the social game itself disappears. Such a break between expectations and chances may provoke the

questioning and decay of *illusio* or practical belief (Strand and Lizardo, 2017), leading to the indifference ‘which apprehends the world as devoid of interest and importance’ (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 207). The hysteresis effect can, therefore, generate suffering and distress:

It is the discrepancy between what is anticipated and the logic of the game in relation to which this anticipation was formed [...], which gives rise to relations to time such as waiting or impatience [...] regret or nostalgia [...] boredom or ‘discontent’ [...], a dissatisfaction with the present that implies the negation of the present and the propensity to work towards its supersession. (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 209)

Time –which passes unnoticed when immersed in the field and acting with its *illusio*– is really experienced only in hysteresis, experienced as painful and eternal. Such disjunctures between social dispositions and social positions might or might not result in the heightened reflexivity towards the taken-for-granted (Decoteau, 2016), which ‘remains turned towards practice and not towards the agent who performs it’ (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 162). Alcohol or drug use as a response to the painful experience of time signals less reflexivity than the questioning of one’s life direction. Under certain circumstances (see the forthcoming sections), nevertheless, both could arrive at reflexivity, which ‘characterises more severe forms of hysteresis’ (Strand and Lizardo, 2017, p. 187) and which can be turned towards the agent that may lead to suicide as a way of superseding and escaping the eternal present.

Although Bourdieu (2000) exemplifies the hysteresis effect predominantly in relation to structural crises or sudden changes, two patterns of contradictions –with or without external crisis– might be identified in his writings. First, the agent may occupy conflictual or contradictory positions in different fields, which results in ‘destabilised *habitus*, torn by contradiction and internal division, generating suffering’ (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 160). Drawing upon critical realism, Decoteau (2016) conceptualises such contradictions between field positions as horizontal disjunctures. Individuals are always situated in multiple fields with their regulative principles and structures of positions, ‘which can provide each of us with multiple (and quite often contradictory) ontological orientations and perspectives’ (Decoteau, 2016, p. 316). Depending on the importance placed on different fields, this may be more or less distressing and result in a fragmented *habitus*.

Cleary (2020), for instance, argues that some gay men she interviewed attempted suicide because they were not able to access relationships without endangering their positions in other relevant fields within an Irish cultural context. Such horizontal disjunctures may also be observed in the study by Marzetti et al. (2022). The authors narrate how heteronormative expectations underpin social interactions in the family and school fields, giving rise to queerphobic responses to young people's LGBT+ identity. Suicide, in turn, becomes a way to escape these fields, where young people's expectations of ontological security are met with bullying or family rejection.

Second, *habitus* may be too slow to adapt to the transformed agent's position within the field. Their dispositions, in turn, 'are out of line with the field and with the "collective expectations" which are constitutive of its normality' (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 160). In other words, there are vertical disjunctures or contradictions in the temporal layering of the *habitus* itself (Decoteau, 2016). That is, the agent's position in a social configuration and the dispositions demanded by it so that *habitus* is pre-adapted to the present chances may contradict the dispositions –ways of acting or thinking about the present– embodied in the past. If the dispositions that produce practice are generally unnoticed 'because of the self-evidence of their necessity and their immediate adaptation to the situation' (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 139), such necessity and invisibility are destroyed in the experiencing of vertical disjunctures. Given the prominence of early experiences in the formation of *habitus*, Wacquant (2014, p. 8) adds that 'the greater the gaps and frictions between the successive layers of schemata, the less integrated the resulting dispositional formation is likely to be'.

One could speak here about the dramatic increase in suicide rates during the transition to democracy with its sudden social and economic transformations in the countries of the former USSR, and particularly, Lithuania (Gailienė, 2004). The *habitus* incorporated under the Soviet rule became incompatible with the new logic of capitalism (although such effects were not observed equally across all the social groups and all the countries in the region, which calls for an analysis of cultural, socioeconomic or political dynamics). Similarly, Bryant and Garnham (2015) discuss farmer suicide in the context of environmental and economic crises, when the propensities to understand self-worth in a determinate way are met with the diminished chances to achieve it. Such changes, however, do not need to be macro-level crises that transform the entire structure of the field. An illness or loss of social ties, which disrupt one's position in the

social space that remains ‘*relatively static*’ (Barrett, 2018, p. 48) but that no longer matches the agent’s dispositions, may also result in hysteresis and unbearable suffering.

At this point, I should direct attention to two considerations. First, vertical and horizontal disjunctures frequently co-exist, albeit one or another may dominate. Being trapped in an abusive relationship could be an example. It may involve horizontal disjunctures due to the fragmentation of *habitus* resulting from contradictory social positions in the family where violence takes place and, for instance, in the workplace where an agent occupies a powerful position. At the same time, one’s past *habitus* –past expectations for the present/future or feelings towards an abuser– conflicts with the dispositions demanded by the current state of affairs. In his essay *Sketch for a self-analysis* (2007), Bourdieu discusses his own cleft *habitus* or *habitus clivé* due to discrepancies between his high academic position and low social origin. This combines disjunctures between temporal layers of *habitus* and between conflictual positions across fields or, in Bourdieu’s case, social classes, which results in ‘social limbo of “double isolation”, from both their origin and destination class’ (Friedman, 2016, p. 132).

Second, horizontal and vertical disjunctures should be considered relationally, not only in terms of the field and *habitus* as relational concepts but also in the context of experiencing hysteresis in relation to others: the others who do not, or are perceived not to, experience such disjunctures because of their social position (i.e., capital resources), or the others who see, or are perceived to see, an agent negatively. When discussing the role of shame in suicide, Chandler (2020a, p. 35) theorises such relationalism between agents by suggesting that ‘in order to feel shame one must be *interested* or *ascribe value* to whatever is lacking, or to whomever is thought to view the self with contempt’.

Thus, while the importance of *illusio* as opposed to indifference, boredom, or a lack of belonging to a specific field has already been discussed, other emotions –shame, anger, sadness, or fear, among others (Abrutyn and Mueller, 2014; Bryant and Garnham, 2015; Chandler, 2020a, 2020b; Cleary, 2020)– tend likewise to be present in hysteresis that results in suicidal ideation, attempts, or completion. Abrutyn and Mueller (2014, p. 337) argue that suicide can often be understood as ‘temporal cycles of grief and anxiety over real or imagined social isolation and shame and anger over real or imagined violations of social expectations’, that is, can be characterised by the shame-sadness-anger-shame emotional cycles.



The internalised feelings of shame are particularly powerful, ‘precisely because the *habitus*, dialectically shaped in relation to the social environment, is “primed” to *understand* particular forms of devaluation’ by means of ‘the literal *incorporation of the “other” into the body of the “self”*’ (Barrett, 2018, p. 38). Shame as ‘ontological deficit’ that may be accompanied by blame as ‘moral deficit’ (Scambler, 2020) and hysteresis frequently go hand in hand, for they both are processes related to an erosion of self-evidence of the social world and a threat to or loss of one’s social position in it. Yet, these are relational phenomena that emerge in relation to the social space and multiple fields with their regulative principles and structures of positions.

### **What contributes to the hysteresis effect**

Whilst the conceptualisation of *habitus* as multi-layered –both horizontally and vertically– enables an understanding of when and how disjunctures in *habitus* may emerge, such understanding can only be achieved with an analysis of objective chances, that is, field dynamics, ‘which are not only multiple but equally layered across time and space’ (Decoteau, 2016, p. 316). If for the relative homology between dispositions and positions –that is, for the survival of *illusio*– ‘the objective chances have to be situated between absolute necessity and absolute impossibility’ (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 213), such integration may be disrupted when the chances approach one or another end of the continuum.

The economic crises and other abrupt transformations such as the aforementioned transition to democracy in Eastern Europe have already been acknowledged. Beyond the moments of crises, the logic of economic field as a particular distribution of economic capital and a pattern of domination may likewise create the conditions for hysteresis experienced by an individual as a result of deindustrialisation or worsening work conditions, among other processes. More generally, income inequality, which forms the basis for the logic of and competition within the economic field, may generate the hysteresis effect for some agents by means of objective material deprivation or subjective social comparisons/status anxiety, which can produce a sense of inferiority, distrust and shame (Layte and Whelan, 2014). As Bourdieu (1999, p. 4) writes, considering both experiences of inequality –the latter *positional suffering (la petite misère)*, which is “entirely relative”, meaning completely unreal’ (yet its effects may feel very ‘real’), and the former ‘real’ suffering of material poverty (*la grande misère*)– is fundamental for ‘*seeing and understanding a whole side of the suffering*’.

Jasilionis et al. (2020) speculate that one of the highest income inequality and poverty levels in Europe may be one of the contextual factors underpinning extremely high (male) suicide mortality in Lithuania. Besides material life conditions, status anxiety in the country is also amongst the highest (Layte and Whelan, 2014). Thus, Skultans' (2021, p. 1) argument that '[t]he neo-liberal message of unlimited opportunities exists alongside ever more sharply drawn features of inequality' describes Latvia but could equally be about Lithuania. Namely, the economic field can inculcate subjective aspirations into *habitus* that meets the incompatible objective chances.

Such processes, however, are embedded in –and as such, can be strengthened or diminished by– the *doxa* of the political-bureaucratic field and the cultural context or moral regulation dominant in the social space, which may by themselves embody as expectations, and at the same time, structure one's chances. First, the state or political-bureaucratic field can compensate for or add to power differentials between the agents generated by the economic field:

Through the framing it imposes upon practices, the state establishes and inculcates common forms and categories of perception and appreciation, social frameworks of perceptions, of understanding or of memory, in short *state forms of classification*. (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 54)

Through the classification of who deserves to be compensated or helped in the face of adversities or need, the state may strengthen the hysteresis effect by inculcating a belief in whose lives are worth and not worth living. As Mills (2018, p. 317) powerfully concludes her psychopolitical autopsy in the UK, '[p]eople are killing themselves because they feel exactly the government is telling them they should feel –a burden'. The Lithuanian political-bureaucratic field with 'some of the lowest social expenditure levels in the European Union' (Jasilionis et al., 2020, p. 11) could similarly add to the hysteresis effect for some agents.

Beyond the financial intervention or redistributive policies, the state 'is in a position to regulate the functioning of the different fields [...] through juridical intervention (such as the different regulations concerning organisations or the behaviour of individual agents)' (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 33). Therefore, not only can it regulate the economic relations through a range of interventions, but it may also strengthen or diminish the influence of cultural processes such as racism, sexism, or heteronormativity. Chandler (2019, p. 1358), for example, demonstrates

how disjunctures due to illness, unemployment or relationship breakdown can be particularly distressing for white men in the UK ‘who, because of historical, structural conditions of patriarchy and colonialism might otherwise expect to have achieved (have felt entitled to) certain markers of status’. That is, the cultural and political contexts interplay and shape agents’ expectations, which then clash with the chances in the transformed fields.

The latter also points to the influence of cultural regulation. It is embodied in *habitus* and objectified in things and institutions of the social space. The extent of regulation can be captured through the analysis of cultural scripts or directives (their content and clarity); sanctions for violations of such directives; and the availability of alternative scripts or subcultural systems (i.e., cultural heterogeneity) (Abrutyn and Mueller, 2016; Mueller and Abrutyn, 2016). Cultural directives define the ‘right’ ways of acting, thinking about or evaluating oneself and others, and feeling or expressing emotions. For violating such directives, an agent may feel/be sanctioned via the status loss, which threatens their social bonds. It is therefore rooted in emotions such as blame or shame that function as a powerful social control mechanism for self-regulation.

Finally, the strength of regulation will be high ‘where the number of alternative cultural systems is severely delimited –objectively or subjectively’ (Abrutyn and Mueller, 2016, p. 62). This interplays with the extent of agents’ integration in a group, community, or society at large and with the prominence of a particular identity or role related to determinate regulation (Abrutyn and Mueller, 2016, 2018). Whilst high levels of regulation may be protective as a provider of ‘ontological security, a sense of shared reality and solidarity’ (Abrutyn and Mueller, 2016, p. 62), it may also increase the chances of hysteresis. For a mismatch or discontinuity between dispositions and positions may emerge as soon as an agent deviates from such regulation, that is, they do not live up to the expectations of oneself and others that are embodied through socialisation.

Hegemonic masculinity as regulation offers an example here. Bryant and Garnham (2015), Chandler (2019) and Cleary (2020) demonstrate how the failure to obey dominant masculinity norms, which are not accompanied by alternative masculinity scripts, may lead to suicidal conduct. In the meantime, Mueller and Abrutyn (2016) theorise how living in a highly regulated community, whose cultural directives are intensely focused on academic achievement with few alternative scripts and an ease of experiencing sanctions due to its strong integration, may increase adolescents’ vulnerability to suicide when they deviate from such

directives. In other words, regulation –like the state or the economic field– is symbolic power, which reproduces social order and functions as a subtle form of domination towards an agent and with their complicity. It is a censorship that is ‘constituted by the very structure of the field in which the discourse is produced and circulates’ and ‘most completely misrecognised – and, thus, in fact recognised’ as legitimate (Bourdieu, 1991, pp. 137, 163–164).

In light of this, it could be argued that Lithuanian society is highly regulated in terms of clear and rigid cultural directives and few alternative scripts. Tereškinas (2014), for instance, demonstrates the salience of traditional masculinity norms even among the younger generations that might be expected to be more flexible. He also finds that, despite their masculinity scripts, all of these men embody a traditional imaginary of family life and childbearing. More generally, I theorise elsewhere (Doblytė, 2020) that this society is dominated by a culture of sameness in terms of appearances, behaviours, or consumption patterns, and in turn, by intolerance of difference. All of this suggests a relatively homogeneous idea of ‘success’ or ‘good life’, which, if failed to achieve, may result in hysteresis and shame. And such perceived failures can be relatively common in the context of high socioeconomic inequality and scarce social policies.

In her analysis of the American dream and its fragility, Lamont (2019, p. 663) connects the cultural regulation/repertoires that ‘people have at their disposal to make sense of their lives’, state structures/policies that ‘send messages about who belongs, who matters and who is worthy’, and social resilience, that is, the agency of groups, which is empowered by the former two. In Lithuania, as elsewhere, these are increasingly more focused on individualised material success and achievements, which amplifies agents’ expectations but not their objective chances. The latter, in fact, becomes less and less equal all over the map (Dubet, 2021; Lamont, 2019).

The promotion of diverse narratives of hope (Lamont, 2019) or the recognition of devalued identities as worthy (Dubet, 2021) will not relieve material deprivation *per se* (state policies and social expenditure remain essential) but will generate broader criteria of self-worth that enable ‘valorising social contributions that are not directly tied to production and consumption’ (Lamont, 2019, p. 685) and that simultaneously imply shared bonds of solidarity and what we as human beings have in common (‘*ordinary universalism*’, as Lamont names it). Such a diversity of narratives (sexual, religious, ethnic, or scripts of valuable social roles) could, in

turn, widen an idea of ‘successful’ or ‘honourable’ life, and in turn, facilitate an integration between individuals’ dispositions and fields.

Finally, not coincidentally I argue that *some*, not all, of the agents may be prone to experiencing the state of hysteresis under the aforementioned processes. Some might embody more expectations and/or have more chances than others not only because of structural processes but also because of their individual trajectories that embody a plurality of dynamic dispositions. The two are interconnected, though. They enable individuals to accumulate capital that defines their positions in the social space: economic power, which results from the game in the economic field; cultural capital, which partially depends on the educational field shaped by the state and which may ‘de-naturalise’ the effects of regulation; and social capital, which is linked ‘to membership in a group [...] which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital’ (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 51). The less power an agent accumulates, the more likely the hysteresis effect is to emerge:

The more power one has over the world, the more one has aspirations that are adjusted to their chances of realisation, and also stable and little affected by symbolic manipulation. Below a certain level, on the other hand, aspirations burgeon, detached from reality and sometimes a little crazy, as if, when nothing was possible, everything became possible [...]. (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 226)

To sum up, in order to understand how and why hysteresis emerges, research should not only focus on individual and their proximate environment, but also on ‘the history objectified in the form of structures and mechanisms (those of the social space or of fields)’ (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 151). By analysing the hysteresis effect, we can explain why some agents may become suicidal. But it does not respond to how and when suicide comes to be an option under consideration. The majority of agents in hysteresis do not die by suicide. Yet, the minority that do choose this option is different in size across different cultural contexts. For this, we need to consider ‘what-makes-it-possible’ questions (Abend, 2022) or how and under what circumstances suicide enters ‘the space of possibles’ (Bourdieu, 2000).

### **Why suicide**

To become a possibility when hysteresis emerges, suicide needs to be one of the possibles. Some social spaces may enable this more than others, although it is never based on a zero-sum principle. The space of possibles or *nomos* that defines ‘the thinkable and the unthinkable, the

prescribed and the proscribed' (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 97) is incorporated in *habitus* through early experiences and later interactions with/in multiple fields (the family, the educational system, or the journalistic field, among others). This space functions relatively unconsciously but makes it into discourse when the hysteresis effect is experienced. That is, the responses of *habitus* in hysteresis 'may be accompanied' by reflexivity or strategic calculation but 'are first defined, without any calculation, in relation to objective potentialities, immediately inscribed in the present, things to do or not to do' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53). The practices generated by the reflexive *habitus* rely therefore upon this space of possibles.

Whilst Western societies generally label suicide as deviant, contradictory cultural directives surrounding suicide tend to co-exist and be (re)produced through collective history and memory (written or oral history, myths, arts, material objects, buildings or places). They may generate the idea of suicide as an action that is reasonable and doable or, on the contrary, forbidden and unthinkable. As Kral (2020, p. 91) puts it, suicide 'operates like other ideas, and this idea is transmitted culturally'. As a result, the narratives surrounding suicide may provide the cultural scripts of *under what circumstances* and *for whom* suicide is a permitted or meaningful option, as well as *how* it should be completed (Abrutyn et al., 2020; Abrutyn and Mueller, 2016; Cleary, 2020; Kral, 2020).

In Lithuania, cultural narratives about suicide as a permissible response to certain circumstances are highly visible. Suicide is labelled as deviant, particularly from a religious point of view in the context of the Catholic majority in the country (Gailienė and Ružytė, 1997; Swain, 2015). Deviance as associated with individual blame and 'moral deficit' (Scambler, 2020) leads to suicide being stigmatised, condemned, and undiscussed (Knizek et al., 2008). At the same time, Lithuanian oral and written history very much renders suicide a possibility; sometimes romanticises it (Gailienė, 2018; Gailienė and Ružytė, 1997; Swain, 2015). The mass suicide of the fighters of Pilėnai in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the guerrilla fighters' suicides (instead of surrendering) during the armed resistance to the Soviet occupation in the 1940s-1950s, and Kalanta's self-immolation in 1972 ('the living torch of freedom') are all internalised as tragic but heroic acts or forms of political protest. Gailienė (2018, p. 4) argues that the altruistic suicides of guerrilla fighters, who were devoted Catholics, 'in a way legalised suicide by pointing to it as an unavoidable option, a possibility to reconcile Christianity and suicide'.

The cultural scripts, nonetheless, may be re-negotiated –individually or collectively, strengthened or weakened– through exposure to suicide, such as stories about or memories of

‘real’ people that completed suicide (Abrutyn and Mueller, 2016). Research (Abrutyn et al., 2020; Miklin et al., 2019) suggests that after such exposure to deaths by suicide in a family or community, the agents re-interpret the meanings of suicide. It may become a more imaginable and doable option under certain circumstances; or, on the contrary, a less acceptable one due to the harm to others. Fincham et al. (2011, p. 107) employ the idea of ‘repertoires of action’ to argue that individuals in some situations may come to view suicide as one of the viable options by considering ‘what people like them –in their situation– might reasonably do’. By taking their own lives, they then reinforce such ‘repertoires of action’ or an idea of suicide as a response to certain conditions for *people like them*. This is in line with Bourdieu’s space of possibles.

Exposure to suicide is practically inevitable in a country like Lithuania, with its extremely high levels of suicide mortality over the past decades, particularly in some social spaces (rural areas or amongst the groups with lower economic and social resources). It is no hyperbole to say that everyone has or knows a friend, relative, or friend of their friends who took their own life (although this is not necessarily the case for attempted suicides, which demonstrates the extent of stigma). Ordinary and common, suicide, in turn, becomes one of the possibles early in agents’ lives. Zemaitiene and Zaborskis (2005) found that the acceptability of suicide as a human right amongst Lithuanian schoolchildren aged 11 to 15 is high and increased from 36 per cent in 1994 to 63 per cent in 2002. Thus, while the idea of suicide is contested in Lithuania –between forbidden or condemned, on the one hand, and glorified or ordinary, on the other– generally, the possibility is there, albeit unspoken. The odds of its activation, nonetheless, depend on the existing alternative strategies.

### **Why not suicide**

Whether or whether not an agent in hysteresis considers suicide is also contingent on the alternatives to suicide within the space of possibles, which are similarly shaped by the sociocultural processes, as well as by individual trajectories. A sense of membership to a particular religion, for example, may be protective (Wray et al., 2011) not only because of belief systems towards suicide and/or the meaning of life but also because of a sense of belonging to a community, which can provide support to an agent in need. Help may also be sought in other formal/informal associations and support groups, in the healthcare system, or within the family. The availability and acceptability of these help-seeking practices nonetheless vary across the social spaces and amongst agents within them.

Access to such help-seeking strategies is particularly problematic in Lithuania. Although the vast majority of Lithuanians self-identify as Catholics, it does not seem that religious affiliation protects individuals from suicide in this country. As discussed above, the Catholic taboo towards suicide was weakened by glorifying certain historical events and legends. Besides this, Gailienė (2018) suggests that the long-term Soviet politics of atheisation destroyed the religious communities and their communal activities. After regained independence, the role of religion in everyday life was not recovered, which may have interplayed with a more extensive process of secularisation in the Western world. Other alternatives to suicide are relatively absent, likewise. The culture of distrust towards the health system (Doblytė, 2022) and towards other people (Dadašev et al., 2016), coupled with the stigma of psychiatry (Doblytė, 2020) and mental illness (Schomerus et al., 2015), prevents agents from seeking help in the healthcare system or from agents' social ties.

Yet, even in the latter context, the majority do not die by suicide. Accumulated capital –‘a force inscribed in the objectivity of things so that everything is not equally possible or impossible’ (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 46)– may not only increase the number of alternative strategies available to *some* agents but also facilitate engagement with them within the identical cultural context. Different types of capital can provide resources (money, knowledge/skills, or social connections) that may be used to reconcile inner contradictions experienced by an agent. Whilst at the cost of effort, such resources are also convertible to one another. When lacking any type of capital, alternatives tend to be restricted. In such cases, other practices, which temporally hide rather than reconcile disjunctures, are frequently employed. Here, alcohol or drug use is commonly encountered (Chandler, 2019; Cleary, 2020; Oliffe et al., 2017).

Each agent, therefore, has a history, that is, ‘the cumulated scores of all his ancestors’ (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 215) and their own singular trajectories throughout time and space, all of which accumulate capital that is not only unequal in volume but also in the structure between agents. This, coupled with ‘the tendencies (to prudence, daring, etc.) inherent in their *habitus* and partly linked to the volume of their capital’ (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 215), reflexively or unreflexively shapes their strategies of dealing with hysteresis. As such, the majority do not die by suicide, because ‘[t]his is not a deterministic schema’ (Fincham et al., 2011, p. 113). Instead, it is a ‘contingently conjunctural and not constantly conjunctural’ (Decoteau, 2016, p. 308) interaction between the depth and extent of disjunctures in *habitus*; the structural forces



that can aggravate or reconcile these disjunctures; the culturally-laden space of possibles, as well as the individual trajectories that shape agents' singular *habitus* and capital resources.

To sum up, *habitus* is always a generative and dynamic capacity of acting that embodies different types of agency as a temporally and structurally embedded process of social engagement, 'which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p. 970). Agency not only differs between individuals but also over the flow of time for the same agent. In hysteresis, said problems are disjunctures between subjective expectations and objective chances, and there may be a range of responses to them. A suicidal act is one of such possibles. Being a practice that 'involves reaching out and attempting to enact some control over a situation' (Chandler, 2019, p. 1360), it requires projection/imagination and practical or normative judgment more than habit.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, I draw upon the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu to think through suicide. I argue that the concept of hysteresis can be a valuable tool that captures the relationship or mismatch between the embodied expectations and objectified chances –between two forms of the social– both of which should be contextualised within their economic, political, and cultural structures. It demonstrates how and when individuals may become vulnerable to suicide. In the meantime, the space of possibles enables an understanding of how and why *some* agents in *some* social spaces actually come to be suicidal. Therefore, Bourdieu's relational theory enables a more contextualised analysis of suicide that bridges the structure/agency divide, that connects the different levels of analysis, and that invites to consider suicide as a multi-layered reflexive action that is never the result of a single cause.

Yet, I do not aim at refuting intra-individual determinants, and as such, dominant psy-approaches to suicide. Rather, as a social justice approach suggests (Button and Marsh, 2020), I intend to supplement or widen these frameworks by demonstrating the importance of studying sociocultural processes and doing so relationally, that is, through an analysis of interdependences between agents, as well as between dispositions (*habitus*) and positions (fields). Claiming that suicide is primarily, and frequently exclusively, an issue of mental illness, psychological characteristics, or personality traits –that is, a matter of the medical

domain— leads to violent individualisation and medicalisation of suicide, and in turn, overreliance on psychotherapeutic and psychopharmaceutical treatments as prevention measures, whereas other levels of intervention are forgotten (Button, 2016; Cleary, 2020).

Button (2016, p. 278) argues –and I second him– that said medical interventions ‘will remain a significant line of defence against self-destruction’, but the fact that there are ‘the specific distributions of suicidal subjectivities within a population’ calls attention to the social, which goes beyond the individual. The approach proposed in this article, in turn, brings to light at least two fields for the socio-political interventions. In other words, it not only ‘uncovers the arbitrary nature of social necessity (domination)’ but also ‘is able to reveal the possibility of the improbable (emancipation)’ (Vandenberghe, 1999, p. 62).

First, if the argument that the hysteresis effect –a vertical or horizontal mismatch between expectations and chances– may generate agents’ vulnerability to suicide was correct, such subjective expectations, and particularly, objective chances could be transformed by political and cultural means. We must ‘take account of the social justice issues that make some lives more (un)liveable than others’ (Marsh et al., 2022, p. 9). Whilst social policies that compensate for inequities in objective chances are well-evidenced, transforming subjective expectations (e.g., masculinity norms) will require more creative and longer-term approaches, for expectations are incorporated into *habitus* across time and social spaces with early experiences being particularly salient.

In Lithuania, the more substantial investment in social policies that battle the high levels of poverty and income inequality could improve the objective chances for many citizens. Given one of the highest GDP per capita levels in Central and Eastern Europe (Jasilionis et al., 2020), the ‘there-is-no-money’ argument does not sound so convincing anymore. Instead, it is the lack of political will ‘to conceptualise and discuss suicide as a properly political question that exposes the limits of social justice’ (Button, 2016, p. 271).

In the meantime, subjective expectations that are embedded in the national culture characterised by high status anxiety, imperatives of sameness/fitting in, and intolerance of difference may require longer-term social and cultural interventions that broaden the idea of success. This resonates with the importance placed by Lamont (2019, p. 664) on the plurality of ‘narratives about possible selves’, which are based not on ‘having’ but on ‘being’ and which ‘can buffer people from the stressors associated with inequality and foster collective well-

being'. Some shorter-term juridical interventions such as the legalisation of same-sex civil partnerships, which remains illegal at the time of writing, could also broaden these narratives by enabling some of them and thus add to the transformation of both objective chances and subjective expectations.

Second, I argue that the study of suicide should focus not only on causal but also on enabling processes, which can equally 'make us aware of new courses of political action' (Abend, 2022, p. 94). That is, suicide is one of the responses to hysteresis in the space of possibles. Here, the focus could be on amplifying alternatives to suicide rather than on compromising or demonising suicide as a response to particular circumstances. This means the *availability* and, above all, *acceptability* of such alternatives –in particular, help seeking in different fields. In turn, for the case of Lithuania, I do not think that the history or cultural idea of suicide should be un/re-written, but rather I argue that alternatives should be made more accessible and acceptable to agents in hysteresis. And this involves not only the removing of institutional (Doblytė, 2021) and cultural (Doblytė, 2020) barriers to help-seeking in the health system but also the trust-building –institutional and interpersonal– and the creating of a more robust civil society (Dadašev et al., 2016; Doblytė, 2022; Growiec and Growiec, 2014).

To conclude, research and practice concerning causal mechanisms can and should go hand in hand with research and practice concerning enabling mechanisms (Abend, 2022). Along with Vandenberghe (1999, p. 47), I, in turn, argue that Bourdieu's theory may represent 'a thriving and well-integrated research program' for the study of suicide as a multi-layered complex process; a relational tool that 'resembles a painting which, thanks to constant retouching, becomes more unified, whereas each detail, detached from the whole, loses meaning and ends up representing nothing at all'. Thus, this is also a call for more *intensive* qualitative rather than *extensive* quantitative research. Whilst the latter –the counting of risk factors that tends to be isolated from their contexts– is abundant (Hjelmeland, 2016), we need more qualitative studies that 'situate suicides in relation to wider cultural contexts and structures and, crucially, relations of power' (Chandler et al., 2022, p. 4), that is, aim at contextualised understanding why, how, where, and when *some* of the agents choose suicide as a response to their sadness, shame, or anger.

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