

Symbolic Violence and Its Impact on Student Alienation: A Field Study on a Sample of Students at Ziane Achour University.

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Abstract:

This study examines the phenomenon of symbolic violence within the university environment and its impact on students' sense of alienation. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's sociological perspective, it explores subtle forms of domination embedded in academic practices. Using a descriptive approach, data were collected through a questionnaire administered to a random sample of fifty students at Ziane Achour University in Djelfa. The findings reveal perceptions of discrimination, favoritism, and verbal practices that contribute to students' marginalization. The study concludes that certain interaction patterns within the university may reproduce symbolic domination and reinforce students' feelings of alienation..

Keywords: Symbolic Violence; Student Alienation; Higher Education; Pedagogical Interaction.

1. Introduction:

The university is widely regarded as a central institution where the intellectual elite of society come together, including professors and students who are expected to contribute to social progress and development. Within this academic environment, the student represents the core of the educational process, as the various human and material resources of the university are mobilized to produce competent graduates capable of participating in the advancement of society across different fields. However, when students fail to play an active role in the learning process, the outcomes may contradict the fundamental objectives of the university. Instead of becoming active contributors within this academic structure, students may experience a sense of alienation and disengagement from the educational process.

This article therefore seeks to explore the factors that may transform university students into marginal actors within the academic field. Several observable phenomena have motivated the selection of this topic for investigation, including student passivity during the learning process, a noticeable decline in lecture attendance, and the tendency of some students to progress academically with minimal effort. The significance of this study lies in its attempt to objectively examine the current condition of university students without idealizing the actors within the academic system. It also aims to provide an explanation for some of the challenges currently facing universities.

More specifically, this study seeks to examine students' awareness of symbolic violence exercised by professors, to analyze whether teaching methods contribute to students' marginalization within the learning process, and to explore how students' preconceived ideas may reinforce their own marginal position within the academic environment. In addition, the study investigates the impact of professors' classroom practices on student engagement and effectiveness. Finally, it examines how symbolic violence may contribute to the marginalization of students and generate latent tensions between professors and students within the university context.

2. Problem Statement:

The university, as a social institution, has undergone profound transformations that have affected both its structural organization and patterns of interaction within it. These changes have significantly influenced the nature of relationships among its members, particularly the relationship between students and professors within the academic environment. In this context, the university can be viewed as a complex social space where knowledge intersects with power, and where diverse relationships among academic actors are shaped by institutional rules and scientific discourses that are often presented as neutral and objective.

Although universities are commonly perceived as institutions dedicated to knowledge production and the promotion of critical thinking, the realities of academic practice may reveal the presence of unequal power relations that are subtly reproduced through symbolic mechanisms. Within this framework, the concept of symbolic violence, as developed in sociological theory, provides a valuable lens for analyzing invisible forms of domination within educational institutions. In the university context, violence is rarely exercised through direct means; rather, it often operates through academic language, evaluation practices, the legitimization of certain forms of knowledge over others, and various pedagogical control mechanisms.

The complexity of this phenomenon increases when such practices are perceived as natural

elements of the university system. This perception may generate among students a growing sense of alienation and a loss of meaning within the academic experience. While universities are expected to empower students intellectually and promote their critical capacities, students in many contexts are increasingly integrated into administrative and pedagogical frameworks that prioritize compliance and measurement over participation and interaction. Consequently, the position of the student appears to have shifted, becoming entangled between their role as a knowledge-producing actor and the demands of institutional structures, thereby creating conditions that may foster subtle forms of domination.

In light of these considerations, the present study seeks to address the following research questions:

- ✚ What forms of symbolic violence are practiced by professors toward students within the university field?
- ✚ Do university students experience marginalization or favoritism from professors?
- ✚ Are students exposed to forms of verbal violence within the university environment?

3. Hypotheses:

General Hypothesis:

- ✚ University students are exposed to symbolic violence exercised by professors within the academic field, which leads to the emergence of latent conflict between them.
- ✚ Sub-Hypotheses:
 - ✚ Marginalization and favoritism practiced by professors toward students contribute to students' feelings of alienation within the university environment.
 - ✚ Verbal violence exercised by professors toward students leads to forms of student resistance or rebellious behavior within the academic field.

4. Conceptual Framework:

4.1 Symbolic Violence:

Violence is generally defined as all actions involving the use of force, coercion, or cruelty, including acts such as destruction, damage, sabotage, killing, torture, and similar practices (Al-Qabbani, p. 109).

Pierre Bourdieu defines symbolic violence as any form of power that succeeds in imposing specific meanings and presenting them as legitimate while simultaneously concealing the underlying power relations that sustain such authority (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 64).

Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron further describe symbolic violence as a form of authority capable of imposing meanings and legitimizing them in a way that reflects and reinforces the power relations from which it derives its strength (Passeron, 2007, p. 102).

In order to clarify the concept of symbolic violence and its implications, it can be compared with physical or material violence in terms of the effects each produces. In this regard, Abdellah Belqeziz distinguishes between two types of violence: material violence and symbolic violence. Material violence causes direct physical harm to individuals or affects their rights, interests, or security. In contrast, symbolic violence produces psychological harm by affecting individuals' sense of dignity, self-worth, emotional stability, and personal recognition (Belqezir, 1996, p. 72).

Operational Definition:

Symbolic violence refers to a non-material, subtle, and often invisible form of violence that

operates through symbolic authority and psychological pressure. It manifests in everyday interactions and social practices and may be exercised by professors, university administration, or fellow students toward university students within the academic environment.

4.2 University Professor:

Conceptual Definition:

A university professor is a specialist who responds to a social demand for knowledge and possesses a substantial body of scientific expertise. Professors exercise autonomy in their pedagogical choices while ensuring that academic freedom and independence serve the broader interests of learners (Toutaoui, 1993, p. 12).

The professor is also described as a teacher, researcher, intellectual, supervisor of students' research projects, an active contributor to society, and a guide and mentor for students (Awad, 2006, p. 103).

Operational Definition:

In this study, the university professor is considered a supervisor and academic guide who possesses the knowledge, competencies, and pedagogical skills necessary to train students and provide them with knowledge and abilities that enable them to integrate their academic learning with practical experiences.

4.3 University Student:

Linguistic Definition:

The term student refers to an individual who seeks knowledge and learning. It is commonly used to refer to learners in secondary and higher education (Al-Jarr, 1987, p. 11).

Conceptual Definition:

Students are often described as a group of educated young individuals concentrated within educational institutions, representing a significant segment of society's intellectual resources (Mohammed Ali Mohammed, 1987, p. 29).

Some scholars also define a student as a person committed to academic study and actively preparing themselves for a future profession (Al-Tal, 1997, p. 43).

Operational Definition:

In this study, a university student refers to an individual who has successfully completed secondary education and enrolled in a university to pursue a chosen academic specialization.

4.4 University:

Linguistic Definition:

The Arabic term (university) corresponds to the English word "University," which derives from the concept of universality or the gathering of knowledge and disciplines (Saqr, p. 49).

Conceptual Definition:

A university is often described as a center of advanced intellectual activity and a source of human capital development that contributes to cultural, scientific, and societal advancement (Shehata, 2001, p. 29).

Operational Definition:

In this study, the university refers to an educational institution responsible for training and educating individuals across various academic disciplines, where students represent the largest group within the institution and where activities are guided by specific goals and academic principles.

4.5 Marginalization:

Marginalization has been defined by Hamid Al-Bashir Ibrahim as the inability of society to effectively activate the potential of all its members in a way that allows them to realize their abilities, talents, and capacities (Hamed Al-Bashir Ibrahim).

Within this context, marginalization refers to the absence of recognition, value, and meaningful participation for certain social groups.

It is also defined as social exclusion or being pushed to the margins of society. The concept has been widely used in Europe "particularly in France" and is applied across various disciplines including education, sociology, psychology, politics, and economics (Awad M. , 2012, p. 18).

Operational Definition:

Marginalization refers to the exclusion of students from active participation within the academic field and their systematic deprivation of rights and opportunities normally available to other members of the academic community.

4.6 Verbal Violence:

Verbal violence refers to spoken expressions that harm the feelings of others. It may occur through insults, threats, ridicule, offensive nicknames, shouting, or humiliating language. (Suleiman, 2008, p. 27)

It represents a form of non-physical violence expressed through inappropriate or socially unacceptable language that causes psychological or emotional harm to individuals, such as insults, scolding, humiliation, or verbal intimidation.

4.7 Favoritism:

Linguistically, favoritism refers to assigning positions, promotions, or privileges based on personal connections or influence rather than merit.

It can also be defined as granting advantages to individuals or groups based on personal affiliations such as family, political, regional, or institutional ties, even when they are not qualified (Omar, 2008, p. 492).

Operational Definition:

Favoritism refers to the preferential treatment of certain individuals due to personal relationships or social connections that grant them influence, privileges, or advantages over others.

4.8 Alienation:

Linguistically, alienation refers to distancing or separation from others. It can also imply a loss of control or detachment from one's social environment. (Al-Muhammadawi, 2007, p. 29)

Conceptually, the term alienation has been widely used in various academic disciplines, particularly sociology. The philosopher Hegel was among the first thinkers to elaborate on the concept, which later became central in sociological analysis. (Gheith, 2006, p. 18)

According to Ihsan Mohammed Al-Hassan in his Encyclopedia of Sociology, alienation refers to a psychosocial state that dominates the individual and makes them feel detached or estranged from aspects of their social reality (Al-Hassan, 1999, p. 65).

Operational Definition:

Alienation refers to a psychological and social condition in which individuals feel detached from their environment due to experiences or situations that reinforce feelings of isolation,

disconnection, and lack of belonging.

5. Theory of Symbolic Violence:

Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), the French sociologist, is considered one of the main theorists who developed and promoted the concept of symbolic violence. According to Bourdieu, violence takes two primary forms: material violence, which appears in its various physical manifestations, and symbolic violence, which operates through more subtle mechanisms that contribute to reinforcing the foundations of the state and political authority. From this perspective, it becomes difficult to imagine human societies completely free from violence, as it has consistently been a recurring phenomenon throughout human history.

Bourdieu argues that it is possible to undermine or diminish a person without those around them noticing, through seemingly harmless words, gestures, implicit assumptions, or even simple acts of exclusion. This hidden form of violence, which may be repetitive, chronic, and sometimes daily, primarily affects the psychological well-being of individuals rather than their physical bodies. It often generates deep emotional exhaustion and silent suffering, leading individuals to withdraw into themselves, suppressing their creative capacities and potential. Consequently, this may influence how individuals interact with their surrounding environment and may result in impulsive or extreme reactions that can ultimately contribute to cycles of conflict and violence.

In Bourdieu's framework, symbolic violence does not only concern the subjective experience of individual suffering; it is also linked to broader political and social phenomena that affect collective representations of identity and self-worth. For instance, practices such as xenophobic or racist discourses may undermine collective self-perception and contribute to identity deterioration (Belouh, p. 34).

Bourdieu also establishes a strong connection between pedagogical action and symbolic violence. In his writings on symbolic power and symbolic violence, he argues that educational practices are inherently symbolic in nature. From this perspective, every pedagogical activity can objectively be considered a form of symbolic violence, as it represents a force imposed by a particular social authority.

According to Bourdieu, every pedagogical act involves the imposition of a cultural arbitrariness through an arbitrary authority. Cultural arbitrariness refers to the selection of cultural meanings that reflect the symbolic culture of the dominant social class. These meanings do not necessarily derive from objective or logical principles but rather from social conditions that shape cultural systems within society. Consequently, the cultural content transmitted by educational institutions often reflects the culture of dominant social groups.

Within this framework, symbolic violence appears spontaneously within the structure of pedagogical action and operates across various legitimate social and educational institutions. Educational mechanisms inevitably promote certain values while concealing others. To mask relations of domination, educational discourse frequently relies on concepts such as order and discipline. As a result, symbolic violence becomes intrinsically embedded in the educational process itself, regardless of the specific educational context. (Wafah, p. 40/41)

6. Field Study Procedures:

6.1 Spatial Scope:

The study was conducted at Ziane Achour University in Djelfa.

6.2 Temporal Scope:

The questionnaire was distributed on November 17 and 18, 2025.

6.3 Research Method:

This study employed the descriptive method as the primary research approach.

6.4 Research Population:

The research population consisted of students from Ziane Achour University in general, with a particular focus on the students who were present on the days when the questionnaire was distributed.

6.5 Sample:

A convenience sample was used, where students were selected randomly from those encountered during the data collection period. The sample consisted of 50 students from Ziane Achour University.

6.6 Data Collection Tool:

Data were collected using a questionnaire consisting of 11 questions. The first section included 3 questions related to general demographic data. The second section addressed the first hypothesis and included 8 questions, while the third section addressed the second hypothesis and included 6 questions.

The data were analyzed using simple statistical tables.

7. Presentation and Analysis of Data:

7.1 Analysis of General Data:

Table 1: Distribution of the Sample According to Academic Year.

Response	First Year	Second Year	Third Year	Master 1	Master 2	Total
Frequency	1	13	14	10	12	50
Percentage (%)	2	26	28	20	24	100

The distribution shown in Table 1 indicates that the highest proportion of respondents were third-year students (28%). This is followed by Master's second-year students at 24%, second-year students at 26%, and Master's first-year students at 20%. The lowest proportion was among first-year students, representing only 2% of the sample. This relatively low percentage may be attributed to the fact that first-year students are still new to the university environment, and therefore their perceptions of the study topic may not yet be well developed.

Table 2: Distribution of the Sample According to Students' Economic Status.

Response	Low	Medium	Good	Excellent	Total
Frequency	2	28	12	8	50
Percentage (%)	4	56	24	16	100

Table 2 shows that the majority of respondents (56%) belong to a middle economic status, which reflects the general situation of many Algerian families. This is followed by students with a good economic status (24%), then excellent economic status (16%), while only 4% of the respondents reported a low economic status.

7.2 Analysis of the First Hypothesis:

Table 3: The Extent to Which Professors Involve Students in Teaching Methods.

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Takes students' opinions about teaching methods	10	20
Teaches according to his own method	40	80
Total	50	100

The results indicate that 80% of respondents reported that professors teach according to their own methods without consulting students, whereas 20% stated that professors involve students in selecting appropriate teaching methods.

The educational process within the university is fundamentally based on interaction between two main actors: the professor and the student. Ideally, this relationship should be complementary, with the professor providing knowledge and the student actively engaging in the learning process. However, the findings suggest that this interaction is often limited, as professors frequently impose their teaching methods without considering whether these methods facilitate students' understanding. This approach may unintentionally contribute to students' feelings of exclusion and marginalization within the learning environment.

Table 4: Students' Reactions When They Do Not Understand the Professor's Explanation.

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Ask the professor to repeat the explanation	8	16
Remain silent	35	70
Ask a friend for clarification	7	14
Total	50	100

The results show that 70% of students remain silent when they do not understand the lecture, while 16% ask the professor to repeat the explanation, and 14% ask a fellow student for clarification.

This finding indicates the presence of a communication gap between students and professors. Students' reluctance to request clarification may reflect a formal or distant relationship with the professor, which prevents them from actively engaging in the learning process. Such behavior may also indicate a tacit acceptance of marginalization within the academic environment.

Table 5: Differences in Professors' Treatment of Students.

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Based on gender	13	26
Based on personal relationships	14	28
Based on economic status	8	16

No discrimination	15	30
Total	50	100

Approximately 70% of respondents believe that professors treat students differently, while 30% believe that no discrimination exists. Among those who perceived discrimination, 28% attributed it to personal relationships, 26% to gender differences, and 16% to economic status.

Students often interpret such practices as forms of favoritism or bias, which may reinforce feelings of exclusion and inequality within the academic environment.

Table 6: Factors of Academic Success from Students' Perspectives.

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Hard work	20	40
Personal relationships	30	60
Total	50	100

The results indicate that 60% of respondents believe that success at the university depends on personal relationships, whereas 40% believe that academic effort is the primary factor.

This perception reflects a widespread belief among students that academic success may depend not only on merit but also on social connections, which may contribute to feelings of alienation and distrust in the fairness of the academic system.

Table 7: Encountering Cases of Students Passing Without Attendance

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	28	56
No	22	44
Total	50	100

The results show that 56% of respondents reported encountering cases where students passed to the next academic year without attending classes, while 44% stated that they had not observed such cases.

This perception may weaken students' motivation to study and contribute to feelings of inequality within the academic environment.

7.3 Analysis of the Second Hypothesis:

Table 8: Students' Main Purpose for Attending University

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Obtaining a degree	40	80
Acquiring knowledge	10	20
Total	50	100

The results indicate that 80% of students attend university primarily to obtain a degree,

while 20% consider knowledge acquisition their main objective.

This shift in students' perceptions of higher education may reflect broader structural and social factors influencing their academic engagement.

Table 9: Students' Attendance at Lectures.

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	6	12
No	38	76
Sometimes	6	12
Total	50	100

The results reveal that 76% of students do not regularly attend lectures, while 12% attend occasionally, and 12% attend regularly.

This significant level of absenteeism may reflect students' feelings of disengagement and alienation from the academic environment.

Table 10: Language Used by Professors During Lectures.

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Simple language	23	46
Complex language	27	54
Total	50	100

More than half of the respondents (54%) believe that professors use complex language during lectures, while 46% believe the language used is simple and understandable.

The use of complex academic language may hinder communication between professors and students, potentially reinforcing perceptions of symbolic dominance and intellectual distance.

Table 11: Students' Perception of the Purpose of Exams.

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Tool of retaliation	35	70
Tool of evaluation	15	30
Total	50	100

Approximately 70% of respondents perceive exams as a form of retaliation by professors, whereas 30% believe exams are intended to evaluate students' knowledge.

Such perceptions may reflect underlying tensions within the educational process and contribute to the development of latent conflict between professors and students.

Table 12: Some Practices of Professors Toward Students.

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Reprimanding students	20	8.19
Mocking students	25	10.24
Belittling students' knowledge	38	15.57
Ridiculing the way students present their work	40	16.39
Considering himself the sole source of knowledge	36	14.75
Rejecting criticism	48	19.67
Refusing excessive questions	37	15.16
Total	244	100

From the data presented in Table 12, the results reveal several forms of verbal or symbolic practices that may occur within classroom interactions between professors and students. The most frequently reported practice was rejecting criticism (19.67%), followed by ridiculing students' presentation methods (16.39%), and belittling students' knowledge (15.57%). Additionally, 15.16% of respondents indicated that professors tend to discourage or reject frequent questions, while 14.75% reported that some professors present themselves as the sole source of knowledge. Finally, 8.19% of respondents indicated that professors sometimes reprimand students directly.

These findings highlight a number of classroom practices that may be interpreted as forms of symbolic or verbal violence within the interactional framework between professors and students. Such practices reinforce hierarchical relationships within the academic environment, where the professor is positioned as the dominant authority while the student occupies a subordinate role. For instance, mocking students' knowledge or ridiculing their presentations may discourage students from participating in classroom discussions, as they may fear embarrassment or negative reactions from professors.

Similarly, when professors present themselves as the sole source of knowledge, they may reject students' attempts to question or correct information, perceiving such actions as challenges to their authority. This dynamic may lead to a latent conflict between professors and students: professors attempt to maintain symbolic dominance, while students may respond through disengagement, absenteeism, or passive participation that resembles absence from the learning process.

7.4 Discussion of the Results:

Based on the findings obtained in this study, it can be argued that university students' perceptions of their role and interactions within the academic environment have undergone significant transformations. Various factors appear to have contributed to shaping students into relatively passive actors within the university system. These factors are often indirect but become evident during the interactional processes that characterize academic life. Among the most

prominent of these factors is the symbolic violence experienced by students in their interactions with professors, who represent the primary actors in the educational process.

The student–professor relationship constitutes the central axis of the learning process within the university. However, the dominance of traditional pedagogical patterns "particularly rigid teaching methods adopted by some professors" often limits students' participation in shaping the learning process. These methods are frequently imposed without consulting students or involving them as active partners in the educational process. As a result, students may develop feelings of passivity and intellectual alienation, as knowledge is presented to them as something imposed rather than collaboratively constructed.

Furthermore, some professors may resort to using complex or highly specialized language that exceeds students' comprehension levels. While this may sometimes be intended to demonstrate academic authority or expertise, it may also function as a form of symbolic domination that disrupts effective communication between professors and students. When the language used in teaching becomes inaccessible to students, the transmission of knowledge is hindered, and students may perceive the information presented as detached from their own intellectual reality.

This dynamic may lead students to perceive professors as the sole holders and producers of legitimate knowledge. Consequently, students may develop feelings of inferiority and intellectual dependency, which discourage them from expressing confusion or asking questions during lectures out of fear of appearing incompetent before the professor or their peers. In such circumstances, the educational process shifts away from a collaborative exchange of knowledge toward a hierarchical structure dominated by symbolic authority.

In order to mitigate students' feelings of alienation, professors should strive to simplify complex concepts and adapt their communication to students' levels of understanding. Encouraging questions and allowing students to express ideas "even if they are incorrect" can help create a more supportive learning environment where students feel respected and intellectually engaged.

Beyond classroom instruction, other practices may also contribute to students' sense of marginalization. For example, mocking students' presentations or ridiculing their mistakes can intensify feelings of embarrassment and discourage active participation. In some cases, disagreements may even arise over students' personal appearance or style of dress, although such issues should remain outside the scope of academic evaluation.

Another significant factor influencing students' perceptions is the widespread belief that personal relationships within the university can influence academic success. Even if such cases are isolated, they may become generalized in students' collective perceptions, reinforcing the idea that success is determined by connections rather than merit. This perception can weaken students' motivation and sense of belonging to the academic community.

Consequently, these factors may lead to widespread absenteeism from lectures and reduced academic engagement. While professors may interpret this behavior as a lack of commitment, students often attribute it to broader structural issues within the university environment. Moreover, external factors such as labor market uncertainty also play a role, as many students believe that obtaining a degree no longer guarantees employment opportunities.

In addition, the expansion of digital technologies and the availability of online educational

resources "including the internet and artificial intelligence tools" have transformed students' access to knowledge. As a result, universities are no longer perceived as the sole source of knowledge production.

Overall, the cold or distant relationship between professors and students, unhealthy competition among students, and the perception of professors as exclusive holders of knowledge contribute to forms of symbolic violence that produce latent conflict within the academic environment. Students may respond through disengagement, absenteeism, or reliance on ready-made assignments and research papers.

In conclusion, the university student today often enters the academic environment carrying preconceived perceptions about inequality and symbolic domination within the classroom. When combined with certain forms of symbolic violence exercised by some professors, these perceptions may generate a sense of alienation from the university itself. Symbolic violence does not necessarily manifest as explicit coercion; rather, it may take the form of subtle practices that unintentionally marginalize students and weaken their critical engagement with knowledge.

Ultimately, the relationship between professors and students within the university space often extends beyond the transmission of knowledge to include the exercise of symbolic power. Professors, as holders of cultural and academic capital, possess the authority to define legitimate knowledge and regulate pedagogical interactions. In contrast, students are often positioned as passive recipients who must comply with institutional expectations without participating in their formulation. Within this framework, the relationship becomes hierarchical rather than collaborative, leading to the reproduction of unequal power relations within the academic field.

Conclusion:

It is important to emphasize that the issues discussed in this article do not represent the practices of all university professors; rather, they are presented for descriptive and analytical purposes rather than generalization. Indeed, many professors make significant efforts to simplify knowledge for students and to involve them actively in the learning process by encouraging participation, motivation, and intellectual engagement. Such practices contribute to making students active participants in the educational process and facilitate their understanding of academic content.

Likewise, it should be acknowledged that many students demonstrate dedication, perseverance, and a genuine commitment to academic and intellectual development. However, despite these positive aspects, the broader transformations affecting the educational and intellectual landscape cannot be ignored. These transformations have contributed, in some cases, to a decline in the effectiveness of students' engagement within the university system and have raised important questions about the evolving role of the university and its actors in contemporary society.

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