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**CONFRONTING THE LIMITS OF SUCCESS IN EDUCATION:
THE CASE FOR A BOURDIEUIAN RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

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ABSTRACT

The injustices of 'allowing certain people to succeed, based not upon merit but upon the cultural experiences, the social ties and the economic resources they have access to, often remains unacknowledged in the broader society' (Wacquant, 1998, p. 216). Cognisant of this, we argue that education requires researchers' renewed examination and explanation of its involvement in the construction of social and economic differences. Specifically, we make the case for researchers to consider the theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu, outlining what we understand by a Bourdieuian methodology, which is informed by socially critical and post-structural understandings of the world. From our perspective, such methodology attempts to dig beneath surface appearances, asking how social systems really work, and how ideology or history conceals the processes that oppress and control people, in order to reveal the nature of oppressive mechanisms (Harvey, 1990). By asking 'whose interests are being served and how' (Tripp, 1998, p. 37) in the social arrangements we find, Bourdieu can help us to 'work towards a more just social order' (Lenzo, 1995, p. 17) in which the subordinated may become 'empowered to take control of their lives and change the conditions which have caused their oppression' (Beder, 1991, p. 4).

INTRODUCTION

Education is often perceived to be the great equaliser in an otherwise unjust society. Since the introduction of mass schooling in the mid-nineteenth century, many Australians have looked to public education as a basic right and a vehicle that will furnish them with the rewards and opportunities to experience more fulfilling and satisfying lives. Yet, as Thomson (2001) points out, there has never been a free and democratic public education system. Because access to education has always been at a cost to parents, schools have always favoured the rich and powerful (Connell, 1993). Indeed, there is a long history of schools having a tendency to 'connect best with, and work best for, students of middle-class, Anglo, male backgrounds' (Ladwig & Gore, 1998, p. 19).

Cognisant of the current environment in which differential student outcomes are attributed simply to hard work or the lack of it (by teachers and/or students), we argue that education requires researchers' renewed examination and explanation of its involvement in the construction of social and economic differences. Specifically, we make the case for researchers to draw on the theoretical work of Bourdieu, which is informed by socially critical and post-structural understandings of the world. In doing this, we explore two questions: What is the focus of and justification for Bourdieuian research, and how do Bourdieuian researchers find/produce knowledge? These form the parameters for the two main sections of the paper.

In the first section we identify the focus of Bourdieu's research as social struggle and, in particular, how marginalised groups fare in this. In naming this broad research agenda, we claim Bourdieu as a critical social theorist with interests in uncovering social inequalities and, by implication, how these may be transformed, although we are cognisant of his critics on this latter point. This is followed by an account of knowledge production, *a la* Bourdieu. In this explanation we resist the temptation to resort to the minutiae of particular research methods, casting some in and some out of consideration, for this is not Bourdieu's style. Indeed, he is renowned for going where other 'qualitative' researchers do not, into fields of statistical analysis, for instance. Rather, we focus on the central theoretical and political tenets of his methodology, identifying these as the broad intentions that inform his research. Specifically, we note his theoretical dialecticism, particularly with respect to subjectivity and objectivity and how this guides his understanding of what is (worth) knowing. We also identify his radical democratic politics, which has implications for how and from where knowledge is produced. In both of these we note Bourdieu's predilection to make public his own positioning. On the surface, this would seem to make an account of a Bourdieuan methodology somewhat easier, although Bourdieu himself would be wary of taking at face value what is claimed about oneself.¹

We begin, then, with a critical account of Bourdieu's disposition for research, particularly with respect to how this plays out in the context of schooling and society more broadly.

A BOURDIEUIAN FOCUS: TAKING A CRITICAL STANDPOINT ON SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

Pierre Bourdieu and those who employ his theoretical concepts have made significant contributions in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries to understanding the role that schools and school systems play in reproducing social and cultural inequalities and legitimating certain cultural practices through the hidden linkages between scholastic aptitude and cultural heritage (Bourdieu, 1998). In the main, their assessment has been that despite ideologies of equal opportunity and meritocracy, few educational systems are called upon by the dominant classes 'to do anything other than reproduce the legitimate culture as it stands and produce agents capable of manipulating it legitimately' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, pp. 59-60).

In making such observations, Bourdieu argues against what he sees as a meritocratic illusion and has engaged in research to expose the fallacy of individuals familiar with bourgeois culture possessing any more innate intelligence or 'giftedness' than those who are unfamiliar with it (see, for example, Bourdieu & de Saint Martin, 1974). In such work Bourdieu (1973, 1974) has argued that it is the culture of the dominant group – that is, the group that controls the economic, social, and political resources – which is embodied within schools. In other words, educational institutions ensure the profitability of the cultural capital of the dominant, attesting to their gifts and merits. Educational differences are thus frequently 'misrecognised' as the result of 'individual giftedness' rather than class based differences, ignoring the fact that the abilities measured by scholastic criteria often stem not from natural 'gifts' but from 'the greater or lesser affinity between class cultural habits and the demands of the educational system or the criteria which define success within it' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, p. 22).

Bourdieu uses the term 'cultural capital' to describe one's ways of being and doing, their ways of thinking and disposition to life, or their familiarity with culture. It is the unequal distribution of familiarity with bourgeois culture that helps to conserve social hierarchy under the cloak of individual talent and academic meritocracy (Wacquant, 1998). Indeed, the 'expected behaviours, expected language competencies, the explicit and implicit values, knowledge, attitudes to and relationship with academic culture required for success in school are all competencies which one class brings with them to school' (Henry, Knight, Lingard, & Taylor, 1988, p. 233). Yet 'the school assumes middle-class culture, attitudes and values in *all* its pupils. Any other background, however rich in experiences, often turns out to be a liability' (Henry et al., 1988, pp. 142-143; emphasis added).

The injustices of 'allowing certain people to succeed, based not upon merit but upon the cultural experiences, the social ties and the economic resources they have access to, often remains unacknowledged in the broader society' (Wacquant, 1998, p. 216). Hence, the implicit demands of the educational system 'maintain the preexisting order, that is, the gap between pupils endowed with unequal amounts of cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 20) 'behind the backs' of actors engaged in the school system – teachers, students, and their parents – and often against their will (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Those involved in reproducing this social order often do so without either knowing or wanting to do so (Bourdieu, 1998). In particular, teachers frequently do not see and often do not intend the social sorting that schooling imparts on students.

For marginalised groups, the cultural capital of their families, the way in which they see and experience the world, is not highly valued in schools, or at least the schooling system in general. For many of these students, access to dominant forms of cultural capital is frequently limited to time at schools. We know that exposure to the educative effects of the cultural capital of dominant groups is necessary for success at school (Bourdieu, 1997). Paradoxically, those who are most in need of time in school to accumulate the dominant cultural capital – as they are less likely to acquire it from their homes and communities – are also those who are least likely to be free from the urgency of economic necessities. The reality is that time in school is a luxury and/or an irrelevance for many poor, ethnic minority students.

It is this existence of a world characterised by socio-economic and cultural inequalities that motivates socially critical research. Such a research approach employs a methodology that attempts to dig beneath the surface of appearances, asking how social systems really work, and how ideology or history conceals the processes that oppress and control people, in order to reveal the nature of oppressive mechanisms (Harvey, 1990). In this way, by asking 'whose interests are being served and how' (Tripp, 1998, p. 37) in the social arrangements we find, socially critical researchers hope to 'work towards a more just social order' (Lenzo, 1995, p. 17) in which the subordinated may become 'empowered to take control of their lives and change the conditions which have caused their oppression' (Beder, 1991, p. 4).

However, critical researchers are committed not just to knowing, but to transforming; to changing the world, to combating discrimination and oppression (Figuroa, 2000). In this they seek to 'go beyond ...

describing “what is going on” and explaining “why” ... For them, unmasking oppressive structures and contributing to social and political change ... is ... integral to ... research’ (Troyna, 1995, p. 398).

On these grounds, Bourdieu is clearly a socially critical theorist, although some might question his commitment to imagining how things in society and education might be different. At least regarding the first of critical theory’s interests, Bourdieu harbours a concern that schooling reproduces society and provides explanation of how this system of reproduction of advantage and disadvantage in education works. Yet, like many socially critical theorists, Bourdieu has been criticised for his emphasis on reproduction at the expense of possible action to create a new and different world. According to his critics, Bourdieu’s theory seems to leave no room for notions like resistance (Grenfell & James, 1998a). However, in our view, his work is widely misunderstood. The same conceptual framework that he uses to explore reproduction can also be employed to explain situations of rupture and transformation (Wacquant, 1998). Indeed, an emphasis on reproduction does not foreclose contrary action such as revolutionary struggle (Calhoun, 1993). For Bourdieu, the social universe is the site of endless and pitiless competition. It is struggle, not ‘reproduction’, that is the master metaphor at the core of his thought (Wacquant, 1998).

From their earliest beginnings, then, Bourdieu’s analyses of social practices were intended to elucidate the workings of social power and offer a *critical*, not simply a neutral, understanding of social life (Postone, LiPuma & Calhoun, 1993). What is problematic for Bourdieu is the fact that the established order is *not* problematic (Bourdieu, 1998). In Bourdieu’s mind, the business of the sociologist is eminently political: to ‘denaturalize and to defatalize the social world, that is, to destroy the myths that cloak the exercise of power and the perpetuation of domination’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 49-50).

A BOURDIEUIAN METHOD: PRODUCING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

In advancing his research agenda of opening up social practices to critical scrutiny, Bourdieu adopts a similarly open-ended approach to conducting research, guided by a particular philosophical stance but not method prescriptive. That is, Bourdieu preaches and practices methodological polytheism, deploying whatever data production technique is best suited to the question at hand in his own research (Wacquant, 1998). For him, it is not simply a question of what technique to use and how to use it, but rather why it is used and to what ends (Grenfell & James, 1998c). What Bourdieu does hold to, though, is the continuous use of a set of conceptual metaphors: habitus, capital and field. These are central to his method and practice, and all other considerations flow from them. They are the pivot on which he constructs his synthesis of subjectivism and objectivism (Grenfell & James, 1998c). And, as explained above, they are also the mechanisms through which he explores social inequalities.

It is this synthesis of object and subject that first characterises Bourdieu’s methodology, which also explains his comfortableness with qualitative and quantitative data, for example. A second characteristic of note is his insistence on participant objectivation, given that all research is motivated by intrinsic interests of some kind. From Bourdieu’s perspective, researchers need to recognise these personal biases – their values, experiences and constructions – and acknowledge that these, as well

as the historical, ideological moment in which they live, will influence the direction of their research. These theoretical and political characteristics of Bourdieu's methodology are taken up more fully below.

Bourdieuian methodology in theory

Evident in Bourdieu's methodology is a rejection of dualist constructions; the stuff of 'bad' theory. For example, Bourdieu transcends the seemingly antagonistic paradigms of objectivism and subjectivism by turning them into '*moments* of a form of analysis designed to recapture the intrinsically double reality of the social world' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 10-11, emphasis original). The objective structures, or spaces of *positions* – 'the distribution of socially efficient resources that define the external constraints bearing on interactions and representations' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 10-11) – are introduced alongside 'the immediate, lived experience of agents in order to explicate the categories of perception and appreciation (*dispositions*) that structure their action from inside' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 10-11, emphasis original).

According to Bourdieu, although the two moments of analysis are equally necessary, they are not equal: 'epistemological priority is granted to objectivist rupture over subjectivist understanding' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 10-11). Bourdieuians see the need to problematise what people say as something other than either simply a reflection of 'what is going on in their heads' or a valid description of the social world (Jenkins, 1992). That is, questions are raised about the degree to which the testimony of research subjects is reliable and about the limits within which they can reflect adequately upon their own practice (Jenkins, 1992).

At the same time, the postmodern understanding 'that all groups have a right to speak for themselves, in their own voice, and have that voice accepted as authentic and legitimate' (Harvey, 1989, p. 48), is central to Bourdieuian research. Epistemological standpoints previously undervalued make up an important focus of this research, creating spaces for marginalised voices to speak their own knowledges. Postmodernism's close attention to 'other worlds' and to 'other voices' that have for too long been silenced (Harvey, 1989) lead many to claim that 'it is only from these standpoints that legitimate knowledge concerning them can be generated and, in some cases, known' (Gale, 1997, p. 104). Indeed, as Sandra Harding (1998) notes:

Starting thought from the lives of those people upon whose exploitation the legitimacy of the dominant system depends can bring into focus questions and issues that were not visible, 'important,' or legitimate within the dominant institutions, their conceptual frameworks, cultures, and practices. (p. 17)

Bourdieu seeks to overcome this opposition between 'theoretical knowledge of the social world as constructed by outside observers and the knowledge used by those who possess a practical mastery of their world' (Postone et al., 1993, p. 3) by attempting to accord validity to 'native' conceptions without simply taking those conceptions at face value. Indeed, he talks of the artificiality both of the vision that he sometimes had by observing things from a strictly objectivist point of view and of 'the

vision that informants proposed to [him] when, in their concern to play the game, to be equal to the situation created by the theoretical questioning, they turned themselves as it were into the spontaneous theoreticians of their practice' (Bourdieu, 1990a, pp. 21-22).

Utilising Bourdieu's theoretical perspective to inform data analysis requires researchers to look at the dynamic interaction between individuals and the surroundings in which they find themselves and situate their accounts within a larger historical, political, economic and symbolic context. Bourdieu gives a very explicit account of what it means to analyse a field by thinking in terms of three distinct levels (levels 1, 2 and 3) that direct the researcher to:

1. Analyse the position of the field *vis-à-vis* the field of power;
2. Map out the objective structure of relations between the positions occupied by agents who compete for the legitimate forms of specific authority of which the field is the site;
3. Analyse the habitus of agents; the systems of dispositions they have acquired by internalising a determinate type of social and economic condition. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 104-107)

Grenfell and James (1998c) suggest that we can think about education in similar ways: as systems of power hierarchies organised within society with consequent effects on individuals who both are produced by and reproduce them. At the first level, there is the relationship between 'education and the political and economic systems of society. This relationship is crucial in terms of what is expected of education; how it is organized and to what ends – in other words, what is valued and legitimate' (Grenfell & James, 1998c, p. 169). As they explain:

Education does not exist as a uniform totality, however, but is made up of a series of institutions and agents, each of which can be defined in terms of their position in the field as a whole: the fields within the field (level 2). Different sectors – primary, secondary, tertiary – have particular areas of activity, which each have specific legitimate terms of governance. Such agents and institutions exist across and within sectors, and their position can be defined ultimately in terms of their relations to each other and the values of the field as a whole. However, there are also intra-institutional structural relations; that is, the way an individual establishment is organized to reflect its competition for legitimate pedagogic products and resources from the field; for example, students and pupils, talented staff, economic and cultural resources, academic achievement, etc. (Grenfell & James, 1998c, p. 169)

Finally, there is the habitus of the individuals involved (level 3).

Such habitus, and the corresponding systems of dispositions, may well be expressed as the organizational ethos of those senior managers who are attempting to apply nationally defined policies; or, the professional activities, thoughts and beliefs of those being organized. It may also include the habitus of students and pupils, and, ultimately, that of their families. (Grenfell & James, 1998c, p. 169)

In producing knowledge, it is important not to consider one level without also taking account of the other two. However, it is not always methodologically possible to present analyses on each level simultaneously. They have to be separated to some degree (Grenfell & James, 1998c).

Bourdieuian methodology in practice

A second characteristic of a Bourdieuan methodology concerns its politics; in particular, Bourdieu's insistence that researchers recognise personal biases that may blur the sociological gaze and acknowledge that these, as well as the historical, ideological moment in which they live, will influence the direction of their research.

Like all social activity, critical social science is not value neutral. All research is motivated by practical or intrinsic interests of some kind. Researchers need to recognise these personal biases – their values, experiences and constructions – and acknowledge that these, as well as the historical, ideological moment in which they live, will influence the direction of their research. Even if one starts with the assumption that there exists a real nature out there to be assessed (as positivists do), nature cannot be viewed as it 'really is' but only as seen *through some value window* (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). That is, there is no perfectly transparent or neutral way to represent the physical or social world (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). To suppose, for example, 'that it is possible for a human investigator to step outside his or her own humanness ... by disregarding one's own values [and] experiences ... is to believe in magic' (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 67). Yet, 'if research cannot be value neutral, it can be – and, if it is to be ethical, it must be – value critical' (Figueroa, 2000, p. 88). It is the responsibility of researchers to 'come clean' about predispositions and feelings, to declare their values, though even this is not sufficient. As researchers are often not fully aware of their 'taken-for-granted's', values must be unearthed, clarified and questioned (Figueroa, 2000). As Bourdieu points out, the ground most difficult to see is always the patch one is standing on (Pollitt, 2002).

Bourdieu's (1990a) rejection of the distant gaze means that he necessarily operates within what he analyses; he is both an analyst of science and society, and an actor in these fields (Postone et al., 1993). That is, the critical sociologist also occupies a position within the game. The objects of analysis within the field are 'the stakes in the game (capital), the strategies, the objectified histories of the agents (their positions and habitus) including, ineluctably, that of the sociologist' (Barnard, 1990, p. 78). This is why Bourdieu insists on *participant objectivation*: an objectivation of the social world that has made both the anthropologist and the conscious or unconscious anthropology he engages in, his anthropological practice (Bourdieu, 2000). This objectivation leads to *methodological reflexivity* when social analysts continually turn the instruments of their science back on themselves in an effort to uncover everything that their point of view on social reality owes to their place in it (Wacquant, 1993). Having engaged in such self-analysis, Bourdieu believes that three types of biases may blur the sociological gaze (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

The first is the social origins and coordinates, the position and trajectory in the social space of the individual researcher (for example, gender, class, nationality, ethnicity, education, etc.). In fact, one of

Bourdieu's students, Charles Souliè, has shown that research topics in philosophy and sociology are statistically related to social origin and trajectory, gender and educational trajectory. This means that:

our seemingly most personal choices, the most intimate and therefore most cherished ones, our choice of discipline and of our favoured subjects ... of our theoretical and methodological orientations, have their origin in socially constituted dispositions in which banally social, sadly impersonal properties still express themselves in a more or less transfigured form. (Bourdieu, 2000)

As the most obvious bias, the position of the researcher in the social space is the most readily controlled one by means of mutual and self-criticism (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Wacquant, 1998).

A second bias is linked to the position that the analyst occupies in the *academic* field as distinct from the broader social structure:

that is, in the objective space of possible intellectual positions offered to him or her at a given moment, and, beyond, in the field of power. The points of view of sociologists, like any other cultural producers, always owe something to their situation in a field where all define themselves in part in relational terms, by their difference and distance from certain others with whom they compete. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 39)

Participant objectivation here aims to grasp everything that the thinking of the researcher may owe to the fact that s/he:

- is part of a field with its 'traditions, habits of thought, problematics, shared self-evidences',
- occupies a particular position (for example, the newcomer who has to prove her/himself), and
- has interests of a particular kind 'which may unconsciously orient his [*sic*] scientific choices, the choice of discipline itself, or, more precisely, the choice of this or that method – qualitative or quantitative for example – or this or that object' (Bourdieu, 2000).

Indeed, according to Bourdieu (2000), the researcher's 'most decisive scientific choices depend very closely on the position he [*sic*] occupies within his own professional universe'. For Bourdieu, then, objectification is always bound to remain partial, and therefore false, 'so long as it fails to include the point of view from which it speaks and so fails to construct the game as a whole' (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 12-13). It is only at the level of the field of positions that it is:

possible to grasp both the generic interests associated with the fact of taking part in the game and the specific interests attached to the different positions, and, through this, the form and content of the self-positionings through which these interests are expressed. (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 12-13)

This particular bias is much less often discerned and pondered, and calls for 'critical dissection of the concepts, methods, and problematics [the researcher] inherits as well as for vigilance toward the censorship exercised by disciplinary and institutional attachments' (Wacquant, 1998, p. 225).

The third and most insidious source of bias, in Bourdieu's (1990b) view, is the fact that to study society the sociologist necessarily assumes a contemplative or scholastic stance. According to Wacquant (1998), assuming the view of the 'impartial spectator':

standing above the world rather than being immersed in it ... creates systematic distortions in our conceptions of knowledge, beauty, and morality that reinforce each other and have every chance of going unnoticed inasmuch as those who produce and consume these conceptions share the same scholastic posture. (p. 226)

This *intellectualist bias*, which entices us to construe the world as a *spectacle*:

as a set of significations to be interpreted rather than as concrete problems to be solved practically, is more profound and more distorting than those rooted in the social origins or location of the analyst in the academic field, because it can lead us to miss entirely the *differentia specifica* of the logic of practice (Bourdieu 1990b, 1990c). Whenever we fail to subject to systematic critique the 'presuppositions inscribed in the fact of thinking the world, of retiring from the world and from action in the world in order to think that action' (Bourdieu 1990c: 382), we risk collapsing practical logic into theoretical logic. Given that these presuppositions are built into concepts, instruments of analysis (genealogy, questionnaires, statistical techniques, etc.), and practical operations of research (such as coding routines, 'data cleaning' procedures, or rules of thumb in fieldwork), reflexivity calls less for intellectual introspection than for the permanent sociological analysis and control of sociological practice (Champagne et al. 1989). (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 39-40)

That is, despite the aura of objectivity they like to assume, many researchers leave hidden what is essential, namely:

the structure of objective positions which is the source, inter alia, of the view which the occupants of each position can have of the occupants of the other positions and which determines the specific form and force of each group's propensity to present and receive a group's partial truth as if it were a full account of the objective relations between the groups. (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 12-13)

Indeed, discovering these properties and making them public often appears as a 'sacrilegious transgression', calling into question the 'charismatic representation that cultural producers have of themselves and their propensity to see themselves as free of all cultural determinations' (Bourdieu, 2000). When faced with the challenge of studying a world to which we are linked, our first automatic thought is to escape. According to Bourdieu (1988), 'our concern to escape any suspicion of prejudice

leads us to attempt to negate ourselves as “biased” or “informed” subjects automatically suspected of using weapons of science in the pursuit of personal interests’ (p. 6). In Bourdieu’s view, nothing is more false than this universally accepted maxim that the researcher must put nothing of her/himself into her/his research (Bourdieu, 2000). On the contrary, Bourdieu believes that a researcher should constantly refer to her/his experiences, not in a guilty, unconscious or uncontrolled way.

As excessive proximity constitutes as much of an obstacle to scientific knowledge as excessive remoteness, turning to study the historical conditions of the researcher’s own production is particularly important for the sociologist who chooses to study her/his own world (Bourdieu, 1988). Given that we are generally more indifferent to the games in which we are ourselves involved, it is necessary for the researcher to ‘exoticize the domestic, through a break with his [*sic*] initial relation of intimacy with modes of life and thought which remain opaque to him because they are too familiar’ (Bourdieu, 1988, p. xi). Only a sociological self-analysis of this kind can really assist to:

place the scholar in a position where he [*sic*] is able to bring to bear on his familiar world the detached scrutiny which ... the ethnologist brings to bear on any world to which he is not linked by the inherent complicity of being involved in its social game, its *illusio*, which creates the very value of the objectives of the game, as it does the value of the game itself. (Bourdieu, 1988, p. xii)

Each of us, then, is encumbered by a past. For Bourdieu, it is only a reflexive sociology that can help:

free intellectuals from their illusions – and first of all from the illusion that they do not have any, especially about themselves – and can at least have the negative virtue of making it more difficult for them to bring a passive and unconscious contribution to symbolic domination. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 195)

It is important, then, for critical sociologists to cast a professional eye on the world of their origin, to understand and deconstruct their own position in both the research and the academic field. In doing so, research becomes a process of self-analysis in which researchers attempt to grasp at a conscious level their own dispositions in order to make sense of those they conduct their research with/on.

The work of Bourdieu also encourages the researcher to avoid the symbolic violence of imposing an interpretation on reality (Grenfell & James, 1998b). In other forms of research, theorising is something that is ‘the sole prerogative of qualified outsiders, once compliant ‘subjects’ have been conveniently milked’ (Smyth & Hattam, 2001, p. 408). As the researcher selects, interprets and represents the data, the intended meanings of participants inevitably become distorted and reshaped (Burke, 2002). Checking interpretations and emerging constructions with respondents, then, is an important part of the conclusion drawing and verification process for a Bourdieuan researcher. The necessity of this reflects a realisation by the researcher’s that their interpretation is partial and limited (Walker, 1983) and, thus, they must attempt to come to understand how all those who are involved interpret behaviour in addition to the way they interpret it from their own perspective (Wilson, 1977). Reality is

contested. Bourdieuan researchers are 'aware from the outset' that their task involves 'not simply telling the truth of this world ... but also showing that this world is the site of an ongoing struggle to tell the truth of this world' (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 35).

CONCLUSION

According to Wacquant (2002), Bourdieu's thought and politics are 'less a collection of fixed propositions and scholastic precepts than a "toolkit" forged by and for research, aimed at posing scientifically those fruitful questions which, by tearing the veil of taken-for-grantedness, enable us to see the social world, and ourselves, with new eyes' (pp. 1-2). Sociologists such as Bourdieu force us to make conscious things that we might prefer to leave unconscious, even though some may have a certain resistance to such analysis. By bringing to light the arbitrary and the contingent where we like to see necessity or nature, and social constraints where we like to see choice and free will, critical sociologists, 'like all prophets of evil tidings' (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 15), have often been condemned for their revelations. But 'you can kill the messenger: what he [*sic*] says is still true, and has still been heard' (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 15).

As Bourdieu explains, it is:

by expressing the social determinants of different forms of practice ... [that] the sociologist gives us the chance of acquiring a certain freedom from those determinants ... It is through the illusion of freedom from social determinants ... that social determinations win the freedom to exercise their full power ... And so, paradoxically, sociology frees us by freeing us from the illusion of freedom, or, more exactly, from the misplaced belief in illusory freedoms. Freedom is not something given: it is something you conquer – collectively. (Bourdieu, 1990a, pp. 15-16)

Increasing awareness of the mechanisms at work in the reproduction of disadvantage in education, for example, can help by offering a measure of freedom to those manipulated by these mechanisms (Bourdieu, 1998a) and improve access, participation and educational outcomes for marginalised and disenfranchised groups. As Williams (1989) points out, for such marginalised groups, it is in making hope practical, rather than despair convincing, that the ways to peace can be entered.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ For example, we are mindful of Bourdieu's unacknowledged gendering of researchers, although this also needs to be understood in the historical context in which his text was constructed.

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