

Beginning with Bourdieu in educational research

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Summary

This resource is aimed at people who are relatively new to educational research and new to the work of Pierre Bourdieu. It introduces some of the important concepts that are developed in Bourdieu's work and suggests, with examples, how these can apply in educational research. It should help the new educational researcher decide whether or not there is something here for them to pursue further.

Introduction

Who was Pierre Bourdieu? The short answer is that he was born in 1930, the son of a postman in a village in south-western France. He trained as a teacher, spent two years serving in the French Army in Algeria and occupied a series of academic posts culminating in a prestigious role at the College de France. He died in January 2002. Bourdieu's output was prolific and wide-ranging, but his work is not always an easy read, whether in French or in English translation. Yet as Jenkins (1992/2002) says, Bourdieu is 'enormously good to think with' (p. 11) and definitely worth the effort. Here I want to concentrate on a few of the reasons that this is the case, and offer some pointers for how to find out more.

Structure, agency and the giving of gifts

Many people find Bourdieu can help them with writing in a way that avoids some troubling dichotomies. For example, how can you present an analysis of part of the social world without portraying people or institutions as completely in control of their own destiny, or conversely as being simply determined by their circumstances? This structure/agency dichotomy is one of the oldest difficulties in sociology (and indeed in philosophy). While Bourdieu is not the only theorist to suggest a way through it (see e.g. Anthony Giddens, 1979), his attempt to deal with this problem is a good place to begin.

I'd like to start with something that happens in all societies, or near enough. In one of his most important works called *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), Bourdieu draws upon the contrast between two different analyses of what happens when people give and receive gifts. A structural and 'objectivist' analysis (such as that of anthropologist Levi-Strauss) shows how most gifts between people are reciprocal and also tend to be of about the same value, and how various functions are performed by gifts, such as cementing social relations. By contrast, a more 'subjectivist' or interactionist analysis might show how people actually experience the process, and what meanings they attach to it (often that it is a simple act of kindness). For Bourdieu, the dilemma here is that these two approaches would give completely opposed explanations of what is actually happening in the giving of gifts, yet they could both be accurate. How can this be?

Bourdieu's answer is that when people give and receive gifts, they conceal from themselves and each other most of what the 'objectivist' analysis reveals. We genuinely enjoy receiving a birthday present, but somewhere right at the back of our mind is the question of whether or not we bought one (or should buy one) in return. This is not the same thing as saying that we are always pretending to be genuine. Something more subtle is going on, which Bourdieu calls misrecognition. To grasp this point we need to add another related one, which is that for Bourdieu the everyday distinction we make between what is conscious and unconscious isn't helpful. Just as with driving a car, a great deal of social practice is semi-automatic, with occasional interruptions of a more conscious and perhaps rational calculation. With gift-giving, he points out that what stops the exchange of gifts from looking like the opposite of a gift (as forced and self-serving) is the time-lag. In other words, '...the interval between gift and counter-gift is what allows a pattern of exchange...to be experienced as irreversible' (Bourdieu 1977, p. 6).

Misrecognition is therefore about a displacement of understanding from one realm to another. In educational systems it is common for what Bourdieu called 'the social determinants of the educational career' to go unacknowledged. In England, some politicians think that secondary schools where 100% of pupils achieve top grades in their GCSE examinations are unquestionably better than schools where 50% of pupils achieve these grades: this belief is made possible by misrecognition. Another example would be where a parent pays a great deal of money for private education and attributes the high grades achieved to the 'excellence' of the chosen school, rather than seeing that the cash pays for a highly focused and personalised education and examination

preparation which, through the rarity of the opportunity, also maintains privilege. In both these examples, the individuals might have an interest that is served by the process of misrecognition. It is worth adding that for Bourdieu, researchers have interests too, and good social science includes some analysis of these.

Habitus and capital

Bourdieu's social science attempts to capture such subtleties, by working across and between 'subjectivist' and 'objectivist' accounts. This can be seen in many of the theoretical tools he developed and employed. The concept of habitus is not just another word for 'personality', but something more dynamic, fluid, and much less deterministic. It is really a way of talking about the embodiment of previous social fields, whereby individuals acquire and carry ways of thinking and being and doing from one place to another. It is about how past social structures get into present action and how current actions confirm or reshape current structures. As the most well-known Bourdieu quote about habitus says '...when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it finds itself "as a fish in water", it does not feel the weight of water and takes the world about itself for granted' (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 43). The habitus gives us our 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson, 1998) or a sense of reality, of limits. Within this we do of course make a myriad of decisions, which Bourdieu termed strategy. Concepts like these challenge much common-sense thinking, such as the idea that inequalities in university admissions can be tackled by 'changing attitudes' or 'raising awareness'.

Many people have heard the term cultural capital in connection with Bourdieu. For Bourdieu, capital refers to what is at stake in social spaces. All capital is symbolic: the clearest example is that economic capital is expressed largely in symbolic terms as money and assets with monetary expression. Cultural capital refers mainly to the products of education, whether these are visible in individuals (accent, vocabulary, bearing etc), connected to objects like qualifications or books, or connected to institutions, like schools and universities. Social capital usually means a network of social relations or a sphere of contacts for a group or an individual. Social life includes much 'conversion' or 'reconversion' between these capitals, such as turning material wealth (economic capital) into high educational credentials (cultural capital) or vice-versa, when a degree from an elite institution often leads to a highly-paid job or minimal scholastic success from an ordinary school often leads to low-paid work.

Fields and doing research in a relational way

Bourdieu's approach is sometimes described as 'relational'. What this means is that the study of the social world should be as much about the relationships between things (or people) as it is about the substance of the things or people themselves. This is why the term field is important, and it means something more like a 'field of forces' than part of a farm! There's a helpful parallel

with the shift from Newton's to Einstein's physics (see Mey, 1972). If your research involves comparing academic and vocational courses in a college of Further Education, you might do well to explore how they are related rather than taking at face value the likely claim that they are merely differently defined. Bourdieu encourages us to be on the lookout for 'the pre-constructed', such as institutional definitions of teaching, learning or success.

This brings us to a connected point, which is that Bourdieu's theoretical tools are primarily geared to understanding the social world. He does encourage an interest in individuals, and was passionate about helping people to change their lives for the better. In one place Bourdieu says very clearly 'The socialized body (what is called the individual or the person) is not opposed to society: it is one of its forms of existence' (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 15). Two things follow from borrowing, adapting or using this position. Firstly, it is not always welcome. Many people in Anglo-Saxon cultures are rather fond of the primacy of the individual in all explanations, even though in global cultural terms, this view is quite unusual. But secondly, and of more practical importance, Bourdieu can help you as a researcher to be specific about your unit of analysis. Again, the default view is that society is really just a collection of individuals: In contrast, Bourdieu helps us choose 'social space', or a 'field', or a set of relationships defined by differences in some form of capital and/or power, whilst not losing sight of the individuals.

Conclusion

There is only space here to scratch the surface, so to speak. Nevertheless, the points about transcending dichotomies (like structure/agency, or conscious/unconscious) and researching in a relational and reflexive way are amongst the key ones to grasp if you want to 'think with' Bourdieu. You may find the approach challenges other approaches that are widespread – for example those forms of action research where groups of professionals (with interests!) are asked to 'validate' some data and analysis. For me, it is Bourdieu's insistence that we need to study and understand 'what goes without saying' that is key. It is also worth mentioning that as with some feminist theory, Bourdieu's approach encourages strong forms of reflexivity in research: in essence, the relationship between the researcher and the matter being studied is itself an important concern.

References

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Jenkins, R. (1992/2002) *Pierre Bourdieu*, London & New York: Routledge

Mey, H. (1972) *Field-theory: a study of its application in the social sciences* (Trans. Douglas Scott) London, Routledge and Kegan Paul

Further Resources

If you want to read more about the need for theory in educational research and its practical importance, see Anyon, J. with Dumas, M., Linville, D., Nolan, K., Perez, M., Tuck, E. and Weiss, J. (2009) *Theory and Educational Research- towards critical social explanation* London and New York : Routledge

See articles in the 2004 special issue of the *British Journal of Sociology of Education* (Volume 25, Number 4) – especially those by Diane Reay on habitus and by Michael Grenfell and David James on field.

For a well-written development of Bourdieu's concepts in relation to social class, see Sayer, A. (2005) *The Moral Significance of Class* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

For examples of educational researchers making use of concepts from Bourdieu, see Ball, S.J., Maguire, M. & Macrae, S. (2000) *Choice, pathways and transitions post-16* London: RoutledgeFalmer; or Reay, D., Crozier, G. & James, D. (2011) *White Middle Class Identities and Urban Schooling* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Other recommended sources include: Robbins, D. (2000) *Bourdieu and Culture*, London: Sage; Grenfell, M. (2004) *Pierre Bourdieu – Agent Provocateur* London: Continuum; Grenfell, M. & James, D (1998) *Bourdieu and Education: Acts of practical theory* London: Falmer Press

An example of an obituary for Bourdieu:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/2002/jan/28/guardianobituaries.books>