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# Bourdieu and higher education research: a bricolage approach

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*I argue for the continuing relevance of the Bourdieusian theoretical schema to research related to higher education. The paper discusses my use of Bourdieu in two research projects: an examination of the educational and occupational decision-making of final-year vocational A-level students; an analysis of the perceptions of final-year undergraduates regarding possible barriers to obtaining employment within primary teaching in the UK. Both investigations offered evidence of classed inequalities which shaped the 'horizons for action' of the student samples. I argue that Bourdieu offers a means of making visible such inequalities although his concepts may sometimes be employed to best effect in concert with other theoretical resources. In the paper, I provide examples where I have taken this approach.*

Keywords: Bourdieu, research, inequalities, higher education

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## **Introduction**

Within the sociology of education there is now a considerable body of review and critique of Bourdieu's theoretical concepts (see, for example, Nash, 2003; Lawler, 2004; Moore, 2004). This article takes a different approach to these studies, aiming to make a contribution to our understanding of Bourdieu in two ways. Firstly, by drawing from data from two small-scale qualitative research studies, I argue for the continuing relevance of Bourdieu's theory of practice as a key conceptual resource with which to address questions of inequality with regard to the field of higher education in England. To make my case, I shall, firstly, discuss some findings from a study conducted in 2006 with students and teaching staff of a vocational 'A' Level (known as the 'AVCE') in Travel and Tourism at a college of further and higher education (FHE) in the West Midlands region of England. Following that, I shall present some findings from a later research study, conducted between October 2010 and February 2013, with the students and staff of

a BA (Hons) Education Studies at a post-1992 university in South Wales. The second contribution of this paper is to argue that a Bourdieusian analysis may not always be sufficient in itself for the researcher to gain traction upon their research data. Thus, following Thomas' (2007: 96) thinking on theoretical *bricolage*, whereby 'finding out is best done via a letting go of the boundaries that surround inquiry', I shall also discuss how I have complemented my use of Bourdieusian theoretical tools with the work of two other quite different theorists – John Goldthorpe and Basil Bernstein – in analysing the research data that I present within this article. The following section discusses the Bourdieusian schema and its influence within the sociology of education in the UK.

### **Bourdieu: the theory of practice**

Bourdieu is best known for his trio of conceptual tools – habitus, capital and field – which, together, form the constituents of the theory of practice; a theory of culture that connects individual subjectivities with objective structure through a continual dialectic in which the individual is both a product and producer of social relations. The habitus is Bourdieu's attempt to represent the micro-level subjective side of the dialectical relationship. It is a set of deeply embedded dispositions produced through socialisation by which individuals orient themselves to the social world on a more or less subconscious level. Habitus is a *structured* entity in that its dispositions are derived from the individual's position within a wider field of social relations. The material conditions and social relations of the individual's position form a structure of dispositions that tend to anticipate the objective conditions of their position. Thus, on the basis of these dispositions, social practices tend to reproduce the objective structures from which they are derived and so the habitus is also a *structuring* entity. For Bourdieu (1990: 54), the habitus is a 'present past'. Through early experiences and socialisation we develop a set of responses to the social world that function principally at the level of dispositions. Thus, 'choices' or 'possibilities' that do not accord with the dispositions of our habitus will tend to be filtered out in a largely unconscious manner.

However, the individual's dispositions and actions must be fully understood in terms of the relational nature of all social life. Thus, particular practices should not be seen as the product of the habitus, *per se*, but of the *relation* between the habitus and the particular field/s within which the individual acts (Bourdieu, 1990). Field is defined as, 'an objective space, a structure of objective relations which determines the possible form of interactions and of the representations the

interactors can have of them' (Bourdieu, 1984: 244). A field is structured because individuals, institutions and class groups all exist in social space in some form of social relation to one another. The habitus will encounter and adjust itself to the demands of the field through what Bourdieu (1990: 66) terms a 'feel for the game', that is, through socialisation. This means, though, that the habitus is not pre-ordained fate. Because the habitus is constantly exposed to the ever-changing configurations of the field, it is an 'open system of dispositions' whose structures may be reinforced or modified as a result of such exposure (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 133).

A field is a competitive social space, a 'field of struggles' between different classes, institutions or individuals over the possession of valued material and symbolic goods (Bourdieu, 1984: 245). The levels of investment which individuals and classes of individuals are able to bring into the struggles will depend upon the overall volume and distribution of the different kinds of capital to which they have access. Bourdieu (1997) identified three distinct but inter-related kinds: economic (monetary resources); cultural (a broad concept including culturally-based knowledge, education and tastes); social (an individual's network of contacts and its potential to benefit the individual). For Bourdieu (1997: 46), then, capital is a form of social resource which an individual brings to the competition of the field and which places them in a particular social space within the field. However, capital is a resource which is systematically distributed unequally across different individuals and social groups, and this has consequences for an individual's sense of what they think they may achieve within the field. In other words, levels of capital inform the structuring of the habitus. Bourdieu termed this link between capital, field and subjectivity the 'field of the possibles' (Bourdieu, 1984: 110) and it demonstrates the inter-connected nature of the three key concepts of his theory of practice.

The linkage between capital and habitus is central to the two studies to be discussed within this paper. In particular, as I shall argue, it is Bourdieu's concept of embodied cultural capital, and the young people's perceptions of their levels of it in relation to the relevant field, which best explains their articulations of their own sense of possibilities. Of all the different types of cultural capital, it is in the *embodied state* where it finds its most fundamental and enduring form. The accumulation of the forms of embodied cultural capital – an 'educated' mind or a certain style of speech or bodily comportment – which tend to be legitimated by the two fields which I discuss within this paper, higher education and the graduate labour market, requires a long period of socialisation from very

early childhood (Bourdieu, 1997: 49). And for this reason, it is this form of cultural capital which is of greatest relevance to this article. As I shall discuss, embodied cultural capital is a central factor in explaining the AVCE students' sense of their own learner identities. Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital, which I also apply to examine the Education Studies students' perceptions of barriers to employment, is itself an extension of his work on embodied cultural capital. While I also include discussion of what Bourdieu would term economic capital in my account of the first research study, I do so via the concept of Goldthorpe's (1996) version of rational action theory (RAT) with the purpose of demonstrating the theoretical *bricolage* approach I outlined in the introduction.

### **Bourdieu: influences and challenges**

The Bourdieusian schema has proven to be a highly significant influence upon research in the two areas that the two studies discussed within this article are focused upon: young people's post-compulsory educational and occupational decision-making, and graduate employability. There is now, for example, a wide and growing body of research which has employed Bourdieu's conceptual tools to examine social class inequalities regarding access to and experiences within higher education in the UK (Bathmaker, 2015; Loveday, 2015; Reay *et al.*, 2010) and also in other Anglophone countries (Webb *et al.*, 2017; Sellar and Gale, 2011; Gale, 2011). A similar growth of interest emerges in relation to employability-related research. Tomlinson (2017) has drawn upon Bourdieu, among other theoretical influences, to develop a 'graduate capital model' which, he argues, offers a more relational understanding of graduate employability than that provided by dominant skills-focused, supply-side models. Other studies have also applied a Bourdieusian conceptual framework in order to develop a more relational approach to graduate employability. Thus, Tholen (2015) theorises the relation between agency and structure in English and Dutch undergraduate orientations towards the labour market, while Abrahams (2017) explores the contrasting predispositions of working-class and middle-class undergraduates to using nepotism for labour market advantage.

Nevertheless, canonical status and influence should always be open to question and possible critique. Two inter-related questions which arise in this respect concern, firstly, the relevance of concepts developed within the context of a particular time and place and, secondly, their explanatory power in the light of other competing theoretical perspectives that have been applied to the field of post-compulsory

education and training. Both will now be considered.

Bourdieu's concepts evolved over time but their application to education was largely developed on the basis of empirical work carried out in the 1960s within the French school system (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; 1979). The focus of these publications was upon processes of social inferiorisation and the resultant educational inequalities emerging from the degree of alignment between the cultures into which children had been socialised in their families and local communities and the dominant cultures of their schools and colleges. The essence of Bourdieu's argument within these works was that the transmission of familial cultural capital down the generations of working-class families, and the misalignment between this form of cultural capital and the dominant culture of the education system, effectively excluded working-class students from educational success and advancement. For Goldthorpe (2007) such a stance was defensible in the early 1960s, at least in France. However, he goes on to argue that Bourdieu does not adapt his thinking in the light of changing circumstances: educational expansion in France and increased inter-generational social mobility effected, in part, through greater working-class progress through different levels of the education system. Indeed, for Goldthorpe, Bourdieu's account of social reproduction is not adequately able to explain the fact that schools can and do *confer* cultural capital upon some pupils, leading to educational advancement. Such weaknesses in the face of apparently contradictory empirical realities, in turn, lead Goldthorpe to suggest that Bourdieu's theory lacks 'prima facie plausibility' (*ibid.*: 7).

Another critical challenge to the Bourdieusian schema, although a less direct one, comes in the shape of theories of 'late modernity', and particularly those of Ulrich Beck and of scholars who have been influenced by his ideas. Beck is probably originally best known for his work translated into English as *Risk Society* in 1992. In this seminal book, Beck contends that contemporary society is experiencing a fundamental process of change whereby the traditional social forms of class, the family and accepted gender roles are receding in their power to shape our identities and personal biographies (Beck, 1992: 87). One of the principal drivers of these developments is changes in the labour market and in employment relations. Beck (*ibid.*: 142) argues that 'lifelong full-time work' on 'standard contracts' – the accepted employment relations until well into the 1970s – has been eroded by 'flexibilization' of production, a process which is drawing increasing numbers of people into the labour market. The result is a loosening of the ties of class, gender and family in a 'social surge of

individualization' (*ibid.*: 87). Beck, though, does not claim that the objective conditions of class are disappearing; indeed, he allows that the relations of inequality – as evidenced through income differentials and conditions of labour – have remained stable (*ibid.*: 88). Rather, individualization is occurring through the weakening of people's subjective sense of class attachment and of its power to influence their lives, for as Beck argues, 'ties to a social class recede mysteriously into the background for the actions of people. Status-based social milieus and lifestyles typical of a class culture lose their lustre' (*ibid.*: 88).

Beck's individualization thesis has been a big influence on much sociological work in the area of contemporary youth transitions. In particular, his arguments regarding the death of a subjective sense of class identity and of collective class trajectories seem to be borne out in empirical investigations among young people. For example, Karen Evans and colleagues, who applied Beck's concepts as a 'theoretical sketch' to examine young people's sense of personal agency, found evidence of high levels of optimism and a faith in meritocratic rewards (Rudd and Evans, 1998: 50; Evans, 2002: 261). Similar results were found in studies conducted in Australia (Wyn and Woodman, 2006) and in the Netherlands (Du Bois Reymond, 1998). Studies influenced by Beck also tend to highlight the complexity and heterogeneity of young people's transitions across all social classes. This form of analysis tells us that the path to adulthood is less linear and synchronous than for previous generations to the extent that old-style clear-cut demarcations between youth and adulthood become much less meaningful, a concept well captured by Du Bois Reymond (1998) in the term 'post-adolescence'.

The salient point raised directly by Goldthorpe (2007), and more indirectly by the late modernity school of youth-cultural research as influenced by Beck (1992), is the extent to which the Bourdieusian theoretical schema can be of use to the researcher in attempting to address issues of social inequality within the field of higher education-related research in the UK. Goldthorpe (2007) sees Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital as a product of a particular time and place (early 1960s France) while the Beck-influenced studies of much current youth sociology would seem to present a picture of flux and complexity which is not readily understood through a Bourdieusian theory of social reproduction. In fact, though, while the education system of the UK in the early years of the millennium is clearly not that of 1960s France, and youth transitions may generally be more complex and individualised than for past generations, the 'narrative of discontinuity' (Scott, 2000: 34) elaborated in the work of Beck (1992) and others, and which is also

a feature of Goldthorpe's (2007) critique, may lead them to miss or gloss over structural continuities. And if we return again to the two areas with which the two studies discussed within this paper relate – young people's post-compulsory educational and occupational decision-making and graduate employability – there is, regrettably, plenty of reason to believe in the persistence of structural inequalities. The statistical evidence, firstly, is unambiguous. Eighteen-year-olds from the most advantaged socio-economic groups are 2.4 times more likely to enter higher education than their more disadvantaged contemporaries (Universities UK, 2016: 4). Furthermore, having left university, graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to find professional employment and consequently tend to earn less than their more advantaged peers, with an average differential of about ten percent in earnings (Britton *et al.*, 2016: 55).

Qualitative research in these two areas has put analytical flesh upon such statistics, and studies that have employed a Bourdieusian conceptual framework also provide powerful evidence of the persistence of socially reproductive class-based educational and occupational inequalities. Thus, Archer *et al.* (2007) found the post-16 'choices' of their working-class, ethnically diverse participants, and their rejection of higher education as a realistic possibility, were heavily shaped by the young people's investments in embodied and classed forms of youth style and fashion. While the participants derived personal identity and value from such investments, they also served to reproduce class inequalities in that they reinforced a structure of disposition that associated educational success as incongruent with a certain type of embodied working-class subject (Archer *et al.*, 2007: 221). More recent studies have found that young people's perceptions of the post-16 choices open to them are significantly conditioned by the volumes of capital – cultural, social and economic – to which they have access. Social class remains a key factor in this, although both Bowers-Brown (2016) in her study of secondary school young women and Atkins (2017) in her study of two young men in vocational education and training (VET) emphasise the nuances of intra-class differences.

Research which has examined undergraduates' and graduates' orientations towards and experiences within the graduate labour market paints a similar picture of reproductive inequalities. Comparative studies of working-class and middle-class (under)graduates have clearly detailed the barriers that working-class students face, particularly in relation to entry to elite-level professional jobs. Lower levels of economic capital impede spatial mobility and also deny the time required to develop marketable extra-curricular activities, while a lack



of suitably convertible social capital means that many working-class (under)graduates lack the contacts needed to obtain crucially important work experience internships (Bathmaker *et al.*, 2016; Burke, 2016).

In short, then, there remains strong evidence to suggest the persistence of structural inequalities occurring *within* a context of undoubted change in contemporary youth transitions. Furthermore, as I have argued, a Bourdieusian analysis remains very pertinent to our understanding of the processes by which such structural continuities are able to function. In further support of this argument, the following sections present evidence from two small-scale qualitative research studies that I have conducted within further and higher education contexts. Both studies were guided, in part, by a Bourdieusian conceptual frame but, as I have indicated above, the analysis followed a bricolage approach involving the use of different theoretical perspectives.

### **Study one**

The data gathering for the study was largely conducted over two months in 2006 at a large FHE college in a big, ethnically mixed city in the West Midlands of England. The study samples were the students and staff of an AVCE in Travel and Tourism. This paper will discuss data from the student samples. AVCEs were introduced in September 2000 with the aim to ‘provide a broad education as a basis for further training, further and higher education or for moving into employment’ (EdExcel, 2003: 1). The aim of the AVCE was to offer an alternative to the more prestigious ‘A’ Levels. The students of my study were in the second year of the AVCE Double Award which was equivalent to two ‘A’ Levels. The qualifications regulatory body, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority decided to withdraw the AVCE as from June 2004, with the last cohort to take it from September 2004.

In the 2005/6 academic year there were 124 students in the second year of the AVCE, a large majority of whom could be classified broadly as working-class, with parents working in semi-skilled service employment or manual work. Eighty-two percent of the cohort was female as against eighteen percent male; 61 percent self-categorised as ‘White British’, while the remainder self-categorised under a number of minority ethnic categories. The bulk of the data from the student samples was collected through a qualitative research design which employed three focus groups, one double interview and two individual interviews. The qualitative samples were chosen to reflect the broader gender and ‘race’ composition of the cohort. The purpose of the study was to address two principal questions: why the students had chosen to

study the AVCE; what they aimed to do after the AVCE. The study was, thus, an analysis of the educational and occupational aspirations of the students and the ways in which these were mediated through the influence of structural factors, notably class, 'race' and gender. Fuller discussions of these issues drawing upon data from both student and staff samples were later published (Morrison, 2008, 2009).

One of the most prominent themes that emerged from the research was the ways in which the students dichotomised clearly between 'practical' and 'academic' forms of learning, teaching and assessment, and the ways in which they identified themselves as being most obviously disposed towards the former. In student perceptions, the more practical and applied nature of the AVCE, and indeed of the college environment in general, seemed to represent a form of release from the exhausted academic 'learner identities' (Ball *et al.*, 2000) of their school days:

'I enjoyed school but I didn't like the whole like education part of it, ok, no I did, but like I was more like practical I didn't like loads of writing and exams and everything, I think that's why I chose to do this course. Cos it's more practical and there's a lot of chatting.'

(Rachel<sup>1</sup>: Focus Group One)

'I didn't like the education side of it – I didn't like the way they taught me. They taught me like writing and listening I teach [*sic*] by, as [name] said, the practical things so that's why I came to do this really.'

(Leanne: Focus Group One)

'I looked at all the other things and as I said – I don't want to do no more school subjects. I don't want to do English again, I don't want to do Maths, so that's when I thought I'll go for a completely different course and start brand new again.'

(Lisa: Individual Interview)

A Bourdieusian reading of this data points towards the dispositions of a form of classed habitus (the self-identification as 'practical' not 'academic' people) which researchers have long identified in working-class orientations towards education (see, for example, Willis, 1978).

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<sup>1</sup> All names used are pseudonyms.

However, a Bourdieusian analysis also tells us that such dispositions need to be understood in relational terms, that is, of the *relation* between the habitus and the particular field/s within which the individual acts (Bourdieu, 1990). Such a reading tells us that the bifurcated nature of the field of post-compulsory provision in the UK, then and now largely based around a clear academic-vocational split, serves in part to produce such learner identities through the structure of choices available to students. Further questioning of the students with regard to their dispositions towards higher education revealed a growing misalignment between their evolving habitus as ‘practical’ people and the field of post-AVCE educational options as they saw them. A majority of the interviewees rejected the idea of higher education, with rejection being expressed in terms of (possibly only temporary) exhausted learner identities:

‘I don’t want to go to uni because I feel I’ve been into education for so long that I don’t think I can cope going to uni and spending another three or four years down the line.’

(Sarah: Focus Group Three)

‘It’s getting to the end of the year now. I’m not that motivated to do anything anymore. I’m only doing it because I have to. I’d rather be with my friends out, it’s what everyone wants to do. So, if I’m slowing down now and I can’t be bothered to do it now, how am I gonna feel when I’ve got something even harder?’

(Lisa: Individual Interview)

Continuing with a Bourdieusian analysis, we may see the students’ exhausted learner identities and consequent disinclination to go on to higher education as a form of ‘push’ factor: a sense of feeling increasingly as a ‘fish out of water’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) in relation to the field of classroom-based learning. Or, put another way, the students appeared to believe (however accurately) that they lacked sufficient volumes of the legitimated cultural capital of the field – the disposition for higher education study. However, if disenchantment with classroom learning was a push factor away from higher education, student perceptions that the jobs market in travel and tourism did not really require high-level qualifications, and that experience and practical know-how were more highly valued, may be termed a ‘pull’ factor:

‘But, at the same time, you could always, it sounds like, you don’t want to work at the bottom, but you can work your way up [...]

and then still be in the same place where the people with qualifications come in, you would be at equal levels, do you know what I mean?’

(Leanne: Focus Group One)

This form of rationalisation with regard to qualifications was reinforced by the students’ perceptions of the value of the ‘additional’: the short industry accredited qualifications that students undertook in addition to the core modules of the AVCE. For many students, these qualifications appeared to offer a more direct and tangible route into employment within travel and tourism than the AVCE itself:

‘They’ve got ABTAC and stuff. That gets you into specific jobs.’

(Kevin: Focus Group Two)

‘We even have extra courses that we’re doing on top of what [...] our course already like stuff like Galileo and courses like Air Cabin Crew, that’s the one where, if you apply, you get the link to Thompsons and you’ll get an interview, guaranteed interview.’

(Michelle: Individual Interview)

‘Cos there’s this new course out – Air Cabin Crew and it’s called Qualification To Do Air Hostess... Air Steward. She says that we’re really lucky that we’ve got that ‘cos they haven’t done it in previous years so that’s gonna be really good for getting a job. She told us that some people applied and they got the job straight away because they had that qualification.’

(John: Double Interview)

As I indicated in the introduction, I believe that a *bricolage* approach of complementary theoretical perspectives can aid the researcher in understanding their data. Here, then, the work of John Goldthorpe can assist in understanding the students’ views of the value of the additional qualifications. As discussed previously, Goldthorpe (2007) is highly sceptical of Bourdieusian culturalist arguments which assume different class perspectives and aspirations as he believes they are not able to offer any convincing explanation for the persistence of class differentials in educational attainment. In an earlier paper, Goldthorpe (1996) outlines his case for a different view of class reproduction in post-compulsory education: RAT. He contends that it is simpler to assume that there is no such systematic variation and that all classes are equal in their level of aspiration. Goldthorpe (1996: 489) therefore

proposes a 'positional' theory of aspirations. Positionality is explained by the observation that in pursuing any given goal from different class origins, different 'social distances' will have to be traversed that will entail differing evaluations of the probable financial costs and benefits of different opportunities and constraints (*ibid.*: 490). Stratification of educational attainment results from the parents and children of the less advantaged classes tending to view the more ambitious options less favourably, since the less advantaged the class positions from which they are viewed, the greater the relative level of aspiration they entail (*ibid.*: 491). Following this reading of RAT, student perceptions of the value of the additional qualifications may be understood in positional terms. For the students, these qualifications appeared to offer up a more direct route into particular areas of employment post-AVCE, and thus represented a traversable and apparently safe 'social distance'. By contrast, further questioning in the focus groups revealed that higher education was seen to have nebulous, uncertain links with employment destinations, making it a hazy and doubtful 'imagined future' (Ball *et al.*, 2000).

Goldthorpe's (1996) version of RAT, then, was able to offer two things to the study of the AVCE students. Firstly, RAT foregrounds conscious, reflexive decision-making and there appears to be clear evidence for this in the students' perceptions of the value of the additional qualifications which are framed within a form of deliberative cost-benefit rationality. Although, as indicated previously, Bourdieu is at pains to emphasise that the habitus is 'durable but not eternal' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 133) and may evolve through exposure to new experiences, it is nevertheless also true that, as a concept, the habitus places greatest emphasis upon habituated, pre-reflexive thought and actions. And, while I am sympathetic to some very thoughtful attempts to 'modify' the habitus by introducing a more reflexive element into it (see, for example, Sayer, 2005 or Mouzelis, 2007), I believe that RAT best captures the forms of reflexivity indicated in the students' comments about the additional qualifications. The second insight gained from Goldthorpe (1996) relates to the importance of 'objective' economic class in decision-making processes. He highlights the importance of income differentials in a way that a Bourdieusian analysis, with its central focus upon cultural power relations, does not so readily lend itself (Devine and Savage, 2005). This is also a pertinent point for understanding the students' rejection of higher education and their faith in the value of the additional qualifications. At the time of the research in 2006, higher education tuition fees had recently tripled from £1,000 to up to £3,000 following the passing of the Higher Education

Act 2004, a fact of which the working-class students (and their parents) of this study would undoubtedly have been aware.

Thus, Goldthorpe's (1996) version of RAT was of value to my study but it complemented my use of Bourdieu rather than displaced it. In this respect, my use of these two key theorists of social reproduction echoes that of a later study by Glaesser and Cooper (2014) which had a similar empirical and conceptual focus to my own. These authors undertook a qualitative investigation into the educational decision-making processes of young people aged fifteen to eighteen in England and Germany which employed a theoretical framework of both habitus and RAT in tandem. Their study also found evidence of decision-making that was framed within a form of cost-benefit rationality and which thus lent credence to a RAT explanation of decision-making (Glaesser and Cooper, 2014: 471). However, the authors also noted that such apparent rationality was itself circumscribed by the social class habitus of the young people, with the result that what they termed 'upper and lower boundaries' of aspirations varied systematically by social background (*ibid.*: 475). Thus, Glaesser and Cooper conclude that their participants' rationality was *subjective*, and this judgement aligns well with my own analysis of the AVCE students' comments. Thus, although the AVCE students' rejection of higher education may have been expressed in a RAT form of cost-benefit analysis, it is clear that cultural norms and principles set the parameters for what could be regarded as 'rational' choice-making or, to return to Bourdieu, the dispositions of the habitus gave the students a sense of 'things to do or not to do, things to say or not to say' (Bourdieu, 1990: 53).

## Study two

The data gathering for this study was carried out in two stages. The first took place between October 2010 and January 2011 and a second larger-scale study was undertaken between October 2012 and February 2013. In both cases, the research site was the same post-1992 university in South Wales and the research samples were the teaching staff and final-year undergraduates of a BA (Hons) Education Studies. I will draw upon data from the student samples in this paper. Education Studies is an inter-disciplinary field of study, drawing principally from sociology, philosophy, psychology and history. It does not confer Qualified Teacher Status, but has its roots in teacher training and is often seen by practitioners and students to be a useful preparation for the profession.

In the 2010/11 academic year there were 103 students enrolled on the third-year of the BA (Hons) Education Studies, of whom 89 (87 percent) were female and fourteen (fourteen percent) were male. In the 2012/13

academic year, there were 147 students, of whom 122 (83 percent) were female and 25 (seventeen percent) were male. Parental occupations were used to help construct a picture of student social class backgrounds, and on this basis a majority of the students from both populations could be classified as from semi-skilled/skilled working-class or 'new' middle-class (e.g. outside of the established professions) occupational backgrounds. Data gathering took the form of focus groups which were sampled to broadly reflect the gender composition of the wider research populations: seventeen females and four males interviewed across four focus groups between 2010 and 2011; 34 females and seven males distributed across seven focus groups between 2012 and 2013. As the degree course recruited principally from the local area, almost all the student participants were from South Wales or other regions in Wales. Both stages of the study were guided by a number of research questions. However, the key question was to understand students' perceptions of what Brown and Hesketh (2004) term the 'social fit' (i.e. the 'ideal' type employee as mediated through processes of classed inferiorisation/domination) associated with different graduate-level jobs, the extent to which they believed they approximated it, and the extent to which such perceptions may condition their orientations towards different areas of graduate employment. Again, fuller discussions of these issues drawing upon data from both student and staff samples were later published (Morrison, 2014a, b, 2015).

Within both stages of the study, social fit for social class was operationalized through a number of concrete signifiers. The following data are used to illustrate student views on the importance of accent, as a constitutive facet of social class, in relation to employment within the field of primary school teaching. Primary teaching was chosen as all the students within the focus groups had indicated an intention, to varying degrees, to pursue a career in that profession. Furthermore, all of the participants had undertaken work placements each year of their course as an integral part of their degree; most of these had been in primary or secondary schools so it was felt that the students would have formed some opinions on this area of employment based upon this admittedly relatively limited exposure to such work. Accent was chosen as a signifier of class because, although attitudes to regional accents in Britain have undoubtedly changed over the past thirty years (Crystal, 2010), it would also be true to say that accent is still quite strongly tied to social class and thus positions the speaker within a symbolic economy of differential worth in which, 'it is common sense to presume a link between, place, voice and a class location' (Hey, 1997: 141). In other words, different is still not equal.

Across all the focus group sessions there was a strong belief among the participants that their Welsh accents would be ‘acceptable’ or even a positive benefit in the primary teaching jobs market in Wales. However, they felt that if they were to look for jobs across the border in England they would likely be judged negatively by their accents:

‘There’s a stereotype as well over accents, I mean if you look at, it doesn’t help by the media as well, if you have a Valleys accent. You have the [television] show ‘The Valleys’ where people are, I’m sorry, but thick, then it’s not going to, they’re obviously going to associate something like student with and it’s not going to be true is it?’

(John: Focus Group Five)

This perception of possible accent discrimination led to a belief that they would face prejudice in searching for jobs in England:

Interviewer: ‘So, do you think you could be discriminated against because of your accent?’

[General agreement] ‘Yeah.’

Deborah: ‘If you went, if I went to apply for job at Bristol, I think I would. Because I’d stand out, I think our accent would. Oh, I’m using Bristol but I think anywhere in England I think your accent would really stand out.’

Sarah: ‘Yeah, I agree.’

(Focus Group Three)

For many, although not all, of the students an anticipation of negative judgements led to a need to monitor their language and to self-correct to meet the perceived professional requirements of primary school teaching. Use of ‘correct’ language was tied to the need to be a ‘morally responsible’ teacher who did not corrupt children’s English through exposure to non-standard forms:

‘I think it’s really, cos you don’t know what else they pick up on, the children, if they, slang. I know there’s this one girl she’s doing something in college and she came in and she said ‘werenit’ or something like that and the teacher said and the children were picking up on it then and I think you don’t realise how young they are.’

(Kelly: Focus Group Two)



A Bourdieusian analysis was central to understanding the students' views on the importance of accent in relation to the field of primary school teaching employment. In particular, the study applied Bourdieu's work on language which is itself a development of the concepts which form the wider theory of practice. Thus, the 'linguistic habitus' is a deeply embodied part of our habitus which creates an 'articulatory style' – a certain way of moving the tongue and lips with the effect of producing an accent (Bourdieu, 1991). Following the wider theory of practice, the linguistic habitus always functions within particular social contexts – i.e. fields – which accord differential values to different forms of linguistic utterances. This structured and structuring relationship thus endows people with different volumes of 'linguistic capital' (Bourdieu, 1991); a concept which may usefully be understood as an extension of Bourdieu's writings on embodied cultural capital. The relationship between habitus and the different fields within which an individual functions as a social actor creates a linguistic 'sense of place'; that is, an anticipation of how valued our utterances (accent *et cetera*) will be in particular social contexts.

Following this conceptual schema, the students' views may be interpreted as a reflection upon their 'linguistic sense of place' (Bourdieu, 1991: 82): their practical sense of the value that they believe likely to be accorded to their linguistic utterances within the wider field of primary teaching employment outside of Wales. The policing of their own accents, evident in the third focus group extract, and the conflation of accent with other forms of linguistic production such as grammar and vocabulary, seems to point to a strong sense that their linguistic habitus is not comfortably aligned with (what they perceive to be) the schemes of evaluation of the wider primary teaching field beyond Wales. Moreover, this form of Bourdieusian reading of the students' views on accents and anticipated prejudice allows us to see their anxieties as fundamentally socially situated: those with high levels of cultural and linguistic capital generally enjoy a much closer alignment between their linguistic habitus and the schemes of evaluation of professional fields of employment than those with lower levels of cultural and linguistic capital.

Thus, Bourdieu's conceptual tools were key to the study's analysis of the students' comments regarding accent and employment in primary stage teaching. Again, though, the study was guided by a bricolage approach to its theoretical frames. In this case, Bernstein's (1971) conceptual tools of *classification* and *framing*, part of his code theory, were applied as complement to a Bourdieusian analysis as a way of interpreting the data. These two concepts are derived from Bernstein's

(1971) work on curricula and pedagogy. In its original coinage, classification refers to the degree of ‘boundary maintenance’ between the contents of different subjects. A strong degree of boundary maintenance means that subjects exhibit a high level of epistemological insulation from each other while a weak degree of boundary maintenance points to a greater porosity of knowledge between subjects (Bernstein, 1971: 49). Frame refers to, ‘the strength of the boundary between what may be transmitted and what may not be transmitted in the pedagogical relationship’ (*ibid.*: 50). Accordingly, a strong frame is a pedagogical relationship which is governed by a sharp boundary between what may be transmitted and what may not, while a weak frame denotes a relationship where boundaries are more blurred.

These concepts were appropriated from their origins in curricular and pedagogical analysis and applied as a means to address the students’ perceptions of their social fit in relation to the field (in the Bourdieusian sense) of primary teaching employment, particularly that beyond Wales. In other words, how did the field (a field in which the students were not yet players but towards which they were orientating their career aspirations) appear to structure habitus? How did participant habitus appear to constitute the field as a meaningful world? This is the crux of Bourdieu’s ‘double and obscure relation’ between habitus and field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127). Bernstein’s (1971) analytical tools offered the study a language with which to address this question. Like Bourdieu’s relation between habitus and field, the concepts of classification and framing are Bernstein’s attempts to bridge sociology’s well-worn dichotomy of structure and agency. Thus, classification may be seen as the system of regulative principles at the macro or structural level while framing represents the principles generating social actors’ micro-level interactional practices (Bernstein, 1990). As with Bourdieu, Bernstein’s theory is centrally concerned with the principles and practices of social class-regulated, symbolic control and domination. Accordingly, if we apply Bernstein’s two concepts to the last illustrative interview extract, we can see that in their linking of accent (and other linguistic constructions) with the idea of the ‘good’ teacher, the students interpret teaching to be a strongly classified field of employment marked out by certain requirements; this, in turn, made it a strongly framed professional area characterised by marked linguistic boundaries between what may be transmitted as a teacher and what may not.

For some critics, however, Bourdieu’s analytical tools and Bernstein’s concepts of classification and framing are two quite distinct and irreconcilable theories. For example, in an important paper Harker and May (1993) argue that Bourdieu’s concept of habitus represents a

largely successful attempt to reconcile the structure-agency divide and its emphasis upon social practice as *strategy* offers up space for seeing social actors' agency. Bernstein, by contrast, is criticised for what the authors see as the rules-driven, structuralist nature of the code theory which limits the scope for seeing agency and acts of resistance (Harker and May, 1993: 177). It is certainly true that Bernstein offers a more structuralist account of relations of symbolic domination than does Bourdieu, although I would not go as far as Harker and May (1993) do in accusing Bernstein of having overlooked the role of agency. Here, though, I want to argue that it is precisely the more rules-driven, structuralist nature of Bernstein's concepts which made them of value to the study which I have discussed within this paper. The Education Studies students perceived (and here I say nothing of the accuracy of such perceptions) that access to teaching employment was framed by rules related to accent and other linguistic utterances. Bernstein's more structuralist conceptualisation of symbolic power relations captures these perceptions well.

This is an example, then, of the value of theoretical bricolage. Bourdieu provided the study with the key concepts of linguistic habitus, capital and field through which we may understand the students' comments about language and its relation to potential teaching employment as both socially constructed and constructing. Bernstein's work on curricula was employed in a more descriptive but useful way, offering the study a language in which to express the students' developing orientations towards the field of primary teaching employment. In this respect, then, the study's bricolage method, combining use of Bernstein and Bourdieu, echoes the approach of other educational research which has employed the concepts of these two theorists to productive effect (see Cooper, 1998 and Byrne and Devine, 2017).

### **Concluding remarks**

My task in this paper has not been to undertake an exegesis of the tools in Bourdieu's conceptual armoury; as I indicated in the introduction to this article, I believe that there is already a significant volume of work devoted to this end. Rather, the purpose of this article has been to show how Bourdieu has been put to work empirically and to demonstrate the value of his theory of practice for analysing issues of inequality within higher education-related research. The particular contribution of this article has been to draw together within one paper illustrative data from two studies which have pursued a bricolage approach and which drew upon the work of two theorists: Goldthorpe and Bernstein. Goldthorpe,

as discussed, eschews culturalist explanations of positional aspirations while Bernstein, like Bourdieu, is centrally concerned with the relation between systems of symbolic order and class-based inequalities. There are clear differences between the work of both these theorists and also between their work and that of Bourdieu, as I have indicated. A bricolage approach, though, has enabled a more nuanced attention to the data than would have been possible otherwise. Two things, however, should be noted by way of recognising the limitations of the two studies that I have discussed and, by extension, any theoretical conclusions I can draw.

Firstly, both studies focused upon the participants' perceptions of fields (higher education; the travel and tourism industry; primary teaching) in which they were not yet players and, indeed, may not have eventually become such. It is important to acknowledge this since, as Bourdieu insists, individuals' dispositions are always relational, being at least partly formed through the on-going encounter between habitus and the relevant field. It needs to be recognised, therefore, that the perceptions of those students who went on to engage in actual practice within the relevant field may well have changed as a result. The second caveat to this paper derives from the fact that the two studies I have drawn upon to illustrate my use of Bourdieu are now eleven years old (in the case of the AVCE students) and four years old (in the case of the Education Studies undergraduates). Clearly, education policy and practices will have changed since those studies were undertaken. For example, the AVCE qualification which the students of study one were following no longer exists. These are both important points. However, by addressing them in a little more detail I shall argue that, despite the qualifications I have raised, the findings of both studies are of significance to our understanding of classed inequalities within post-compulsory education.

With regard to the first point, although the students' comments were directed at fields in which they had not become players, they nevertheless relate to what Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) term 'horizons for action' – the sphere of practicable and reasonable educational and career decision-making that an individual feels is open to them based upon their perceptions of their position within highly competitive education and labour markets. This concept from Hodkinson and Sparkes' theory of career decision-making, a theory which is itself strongly indebted to the work of Bourdieu, captures well the nature of the class-based inequalities evident in the two studies: in both cases the participants appeared to delimit their horizons for action due to apprehensions of a lack of alignment between their habitus and

the perceived demands of the relevant field (higher education study; primary teaching beyond Wales). Anxieties, whether accurate or not, that they lacked sufficient stock of the legitimated cultural capital of the field (disposition for higher education study; ‘appropriate’ accent for primary teaching) seemed to present barriers to these paths and, to draw upon another Bourdieusian concept previously discussed, the students’ ‘field of the possibles’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 110) became restricted. Here, though, should make clear that I make no normative judgements about what is ‘best’ for the students of these studies. For example, in relation to the further education students of study one, I would agree with Watts and Bridges’ (2006: 285) argument that we must value the aspirations of all young people who, for whatever reasons, choose not to participate in HE.

In relation to the second point, while it is true that education policy has changed, particularly since the first study was undertaken eleven years ago, the structural conditions for the class-based inequalities that I discuss remain firmly in place. For example, although the AVCE qualification no longer exists, the bifurcated division between academic and vocational education, whereby the former is privileged over the latter, and this privilege then both reflects and reproduces pre-existing class disadvantages, is still a salient feature of the post-compulsory landscape today (Hodgson and Spours, 2014, 2016). In sum, then, class-related inequalities remain a pervasive educational problem and, so long as they do, they will obviously continue to be a key focus of higher education-related research. As I have aimed to demonstrate within this paper, the value of a Bourdieusian analysis, combined with a bricolage approach, has been to understand the socially constructed and constructing nature of such processes. Or, as Reay (2004: 439) puts it, it is the capacity to view structure as inherent within small-scale interactions and activity within macro-scale contexts.

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