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How Bourdieu bites back: recognising misrecognition in education and educational research

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Having noted that some use of Bourdieusian concepts in educational research is superficial, this paper offers a view of the distinctiveness of Bourdieu's concepts via the example of misrecognition, which is differentiated from the concept with the same name in Fraser's work. An account is given of a recent research project on white middle-class identity and school choice, which suggests that whilst parents avoided a common misrecognition (regarding school quality), they were nevertheless reliant on other forms of misrecognition (regarding the qualities of their children) that are equally important in the relationship between social class and educational inequalities. Finally, the paper suggests that educational understandings, including some educational research, are predisposed to misrecognise Bourdieusian concepts, and four areas of tension are identified. The paper argues against 'light usage' of Bourdieu whilst acknowledging that the approach can produce a pessimistic account that is at odds with some educational values.

Keywords: misrecognition; Bourdieu; educational research; middle-class school choice

Introduction

Many educational researchers find Bourdieu's concepts attractive and useful, though there is great variability in what we might call 'depth in use'. Undoubtedly, some usage remains at the level of what Reay described as 'the habitual use of Habitus' (Reay, 2004), or what Hey (2003) termed 'intellectual hairspray'. This paper sets out an argument that, at least in the case of educational research, the superficial use of Bourdieusian tools is likely to be due to (a) the apparent similarity of other concepts with similar names, and (b) important tensions between a Bourdieusian approach and some key characteristics of educational practice, policy and research

To do this, the paper begins with a comparison of the concept of *misrecognition* as this appears in the hands of Nancy Fraser and Pierre Bourdieu, respectively, arguing that the first is more readily understood than the second, and that whilst the concepts overlap they are crucially different. It then looks at the concept of misrecognition as this applies to the analysis of some of the data in a research project entitled 'Identities, Educational Choice and the White Urban Middle Classes', which studied 125 families in three English cities to investigate motives, experiences and outcomes where families made 'against the grain' choices of secondary school.

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The argument here is that the families concerned identified and avoided one very common and powerful form of misrecognition, but that other forms of misrecognition remained key in their engagements with education. Finally, having identified areas of tension, I argue that whilst it is understandable, ‘light usage’ of Bourdieu is of little value and that the tendency to pessimism in Bourdieusian social theory presents particular difficulties to educationists.

Misrecognition: Fraser and Bourdieu

It is tempting to illustrate the potential confusion between Bourdieusian concepts and other similar-sounding concepts with the example of social capital: When Putnam’s concept with the same name was taken up and used widely by some national governments and international organisations in the early 2000s, many of those wishing to use Bourdieu’s concept often found themselves explaining the contrast with Putnam and Coleman (see for example Blackshaw & Long, 2005). Here, my focus is on misrecognition, a term central to the work of both Nancy Fraser and Pierre Bourdieu in the sets of ideas they each provide that can help in the task of investigating, understanding and ameliorating aspects of the social world. The philosophical relationship between Fraser’s and Bourdieu’s thinking is helpfully explored in an edited collection (Lovell, 2007), inspired by an exchange between Honneth and Fraser in which Bourdieu was ‘a tacit third party’ (Lovell, 2007, p. 67). Whilst the detail of Lovell’s account is beyond the scope of the current paper, it is worth noting Lovell’s strong implication that there is both an affinity and a useful complementarity:

Fraser holds the place ... for participatory parity, dialogics and agency in normative social transformation. Bourdieu, on the other hand, holds the place for the powers that thwart these processes and that condition and shape agency.... He is a pessimist rather than a determinist, and his pessimism is sometimes salutary. (Lovell, 2007, p. 7)

This complementarity might lead one to expect that *misrecognition*, a prominent term in the work of both theorists, refers to a similar set of concerns. However, whilst they are related, the concepts of misrecognition in the work of each actually refer to different processes.

In Fraser’s hands, the concept of misrecognition refers to one of two ‘distinct species of injustice’:

(T)he most general meaning of justice is parity of participation. According to this radical-democratic interpretation of the principle of equal moral worth, justice requires social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life. Overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalized obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction. Previously, I have analysed two distinct kinds of obstacles to participatory parity, which correspond to two distinct species of injustice ... On the one hand, people can be impeded from full participation by economic structures that deny them the resources they need in order to interact with others as peers; in that case they suffer from distributive injustice or maldistribution. On the other hand, people can also be prevented from interacting on terms of parity by institutionalized hierarchies of cultural value that deny them the requisite standing; in that case they suffer from status inequality or misrecognition. (Fraser, 2007, p. 20)

As in Weber’s sociology, these ‘class structure’ and ‘status order’ dimensions have a degree of autonomy and do not neatly mirror each other in modern capitalist

societies. They can interact in a causal way, but neither can be collapsed into the other. This dual framework for looking at and thinking about social justice is now widely known and appreciated. Fraser has, however, augmented it in later work, taking into account the limitations of considering justice issues mainly or only within a particular concept of the territorial state. Globalisation makes us question the previously largely unexamined assumptions that justice itself was to be understood within what Fraser calls the ‘Keynesian-Westphalian frame’.

The third dimension of justice is the *political*. Of course, distribution and recognition are themselves political.... But I mean political in a more specific, constitutive sense ... (which) furnishes the stage on which struggles over distribution and recognition are played out. Establishing criteria of social belonging, and thus determining who counts as a member, the political dimension of justice specifies the reach of those other dimensions: it tells us who is included, and who excluded, from the circle of those entitled to a just distribution and reciprocal recognition. (Fraser, 2007, pp. 20–21)

The Keynesian-Westphalian frame is now firmly part of the problem – ‘as it partitions political space in ways that block many who are poor and despised from challenging the forces that oppress them ... this frame insulates offshore powers from critique and control’ (Fraser, 2007, p. 23).

For Fraser, then, misrecognition includes the denial of common humanity or citizenship, and the equal worth that flows from that (see Lister, 2007, p. 164). Her concepts of recognition and misrecognition include but are not confined to questions of identity, group identity and the psychological damage to individual selves that might follow denigration of a group. Her ‘status model’ is primarily about material conditions – whether or not people have ‘participatory parity’ – that is, whether or not they are full partners in social interaction (for Lister, Fraser underplays the psychic harm that flows from misrecognition, and she gives an example from Adair’s work on poverty to illustrate – see *ibid.*, p. 165). In Fraser’s developed model, the ‘economic realm’ concepts (maldistribution/redistribution) and those of the ‘cultural realm’ (recognition/misrecognition) are augmented with those pertaining to the political realm, that is, inclusion, exclusion and marginalisation. Together these offer a means to explore and understand injustice, whether it is that following from the denial of ‘voice’ to certain social groups, for example that suffered by workers in garment factories supplying consumer markets in the West, or that produced by the operation of categories of citizen, immigrant, migrant worker, refugee or asylum-seeker. One particularly interesting application of this framework uses it to examine post-1944 education policy in England, illustrating a shift through policies that focus on redistribution, then recognition, then representation (Power, 2012). There is a strong resonance between Fraser’s three realms and Bourdieu’s concept of *field*, specifically that persons are differentially positioned in fields by virtue of the capitals to which they have access. A good example here might be a well-qualified professional who settles in a new country and finds that his/her standing and qualifications are not recognised in the new setting.

However, Bourdieu’s concept of misrecognition is different, and it arises from his central concern with social practices in social spaces or fields. In Bourdieu’s view, social fields produce knowledge, and knowledge is a form of capital, associated with prestige or power. Crucially, ‘knowledge’ here is a translation of the French word ‘*connaissance*’, so does not only refer to knowledge of facts or knowledge about things, as usually implied in phrases like ‘knowledge is power’ or ‘the knowledge economy’: it also means being familiar in an implicit or tacit way,

and knowing how to do things, such as how to act or how to engage in different social situations or in relation to different orthodoxies. The close connection with ‘habitus’ is clear, in the sense given in that most well-known of all Bourdieu quotes: ‘when the 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). It is only through appreciating this meaning of ‘knowledge’ that we can fully grasp the related terms, namely ‘*reconnaissance*’ (knowing again – recognition) and ‘*meconnaissance*’ (misrecognition). The latter term is not about recognition or the lack of it in Fraser’s terms, but rather refers to a social practice of individual or collective misattribution:

Misrecognition relates to the ways ... (that) underlying processes and generating structures of fields are not consciously acknowledged in terms of the social differentiation they perpetuate, often in the name of democracy and equality.... As a translation of *meconnaissance*, however, *misrecognition* does not quite place the necessary emphasis on how a practice might be made “...invisible through a displacement of understanding and a reconstrual as part of other aspects of the habitus that ‘go without saying’” (Mahar et al., 1990, p. 19). Such misrecognition operates in the education system, Bourdieu argues, through an arbitrary curriculum that is “naturalised” so that social classifications are transformed into academic ones. The result is that instead of being experienced for what they are (i.e. partial and technical hierarchies), such social classifications become “total” hierarchies, experienced as if they were grounded in nature. (Grenfell & James, 1998, pp. 23–24)

For Bourdieu, then, misrecognition refers to an everyday and dynamic social process where one thing (say, a situation, process, or action) is not recognised for what it is because it was not previously ‘cognised’ within the range of dispositions and propensities of the habitus of the person(s) confronting it (see Bourdieu, 2000). Instead the thing is attributed to another available realm of meaning, and, in the process, interests, inequities or other effects may be maintained whilst they remain concealed. An everyday example of this would be the contemporary use of supermarket and retail loyalty cards. These are deliberately presented (and conventionally regarded) as a system for rewarding repeat custom through the accumulation of points that represent cash value. However, they are also (one might say *really*) a system for harvesting detailed information about consumption that enables new forms of individually targeted marketing. Customers are likely to attribute actions around loyalty cards to the realm of customer loyalty, whereas it could be argued that they are selling detailed information on their purchasing habits to a group of retailers, who are then in a much better position to secure further profit from the same individuals. Another everyday example is the way that most mobile phone use is carried out without much awareness that it generates a vast amount of detailed data that has high value to those able to generate new forms of profitable business. As both examples illustrate, the concept of misrecognition is linked to Bourdieu’s rejection of any simple distinction between the conscious and unconscious: Many people half know that something else is going on with their loyalty card, but that is not the same thing as saying that this vague awareness comes to the surface in conscious and calculated decisions about how to act, such as whether or not to use their loyalty card. The example also illustrates another important point: that misrecognition is ‘functional’ rather than simply aberrant or some sort of unintended by-product. Bourdieu would describe it thus:

In an economy which is defined by the refusal to recognise the ‘objective’ truth of ‘economic’ practices, that is, the law of ‘naked self-interest’ and egoistic calculation, even ‘economic’ capital cannot act unless it succeeds in being recognized through a conversion that can render unrecognizable the true principle of its efficacy. Symbolic capital is thus denied capital, recognized as legitimate, that is, misrecognised as capital.... (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 118)

The classic example of educational misrecognition refers to the general relationship of educational success to social advantage. The common-sense assumption here is rather like traditional functionalist sociology – that social background does affect educational progress and achievement, but that the fact it does so is an unfortunate anomaly, an aberration or dysfunctional feature of an otherwise largely benign and socially neutral process. Common sense has it that education should not really generate social inequality and that it doesn’t *have* to, and that action to overcome this effect is about identifying and then removing the ‘barriers’, or perhaps ‘raising standards for all’. Bourdieu explicitly counters this view:

Misrecognition of the social determinants of the educational career – and therefore of the social trajectory it helps to determine – gives the educational certificate the value of a natural right and makes the educational system one of the fundamental agencies of the maintenance of the social order. (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 387)

Here, the ‘social order’ includes ongoing social inequality, within which certain forms of a lack of recognition (misrecognition in the Fraser sense) will play a large part. Clearly, both Fraser and Bourdieu are concerned with social inequalities and how they may be understood, challenged, reduced or overcome, yet their distinct concepts of misrecognition also point to different starting-points and projects. In one sense Fraser’s concept of misrecognition is close to Bourdieu’s *symbolic violence*, because those excluded or without a voice are denied part of what it is to be fully human, and this appears at least psychologically abusive. However, the concept of symbolic violence, and that of symbolic capital, represents an important part of Bourdieu’s break with Marxism (for a good account of this, and of the various theoretical traditions brought together by Bourdieu, see Swartz, 1997). For Bourdieu, most domination in advanced societies is now symbolic rather than achieved by force and, furthermore, the process is not one of simply ‘duping’ people or flooding them with propaganda, or even persuading them. Domination usually involves at least some sense of largely below-conscious complicity on the part of those subjugated, and processes of misrecognition are what make this possible: ‘symbolic violence is that form of violence which only acts on social agents with their complicity’ (Poupeau, 2000, p. 71).

Putting Bourdieu’s concept of misrecognition to work

Given its centrality in Bourdieu’s theoretical tools, it is at first surprising to find that the concept of misrecognition is not as widely used as concepts like cultural and social capital in contemporary educational research. A notable exception would be Thompson’s recent critique of the notion of ‘scaling up’ (Thomson, 2014). Misrecognition was, however, central to the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded project ‘Identity, Educational Choice and the White Urban Middle Classes’ (Award reference RES-148-25-0023), which investigated a cross-section of ‘against the grain’ examples of school choice, where white urban

middle-class families in England eschewed more apparently dependable state and private alternatives available to them and instead chose ordinary state comprehensive secondary schools for their children. The purposes of the study included attempting to understand school choice practices and processes in terms of orientations and motivations, and ethnicity and class, and it aimed to investigate how such practices were related to identity and identification in the light of contemporary conceptions of the middle-class self. The investigation included interviewing parents and children in 125 white middle-class households in London and two provincial cities in England, ‘Riverton’ in the South West and ‘Norton’ in the North East.¹ These families had all made a positive choice in favour of a state secondary school that was performing at or below the England average according to conventional examination league-tables. The study began in mid-2005 and covered a 30-month period, concluding in 2007, and was part of the ESRC Identities and Social Action Programme. The outcomes of the study are extensively reported elsewhere (e.g. Crozier et al., 2008; James et al., 2010; Reay et al., 2007; Reay et al., 2008; Reay et al., 2011 [2013]): Here, some brief details are given to contextualise the discussion, but the main purpose is to consider how Bourdieu’s concept of misrecognition was put to work in the study, and to give some consideration of how this illuminates a tension between a Bourdieu-inspired approach and some common values and understandings that run through the world of education.

One of the most striking findings was that surprisingly few of the ‘against-the-grain’ school choices could be attributed to strong commitments to the welfare state or a strong communitarian, egalitarian political position. Instead, a widespread motivation was a wish for children to have an educational experience that would prepare them for a globalised, socially diverse, multicultural world. Sometimes this was linked to parents’ active dislike for privileged educational routes on the grounds that they were socially divisive, and their wish to avoid contributing to social division. Often the higher-achieving secondary schools available to them were, in their view, insufficiently socially and ethnically diverse and could not provide the sort of ‘real world’ environment that would help realise a broad educational project and develop their child in particular, valued directions.

The analysis differentiates between first-generation, second-generation and established middle-class families, as family history played a prominent role in school choice and across these groups there were some important differences in the rationales given. However, taken as one group the parents concerned were distinctive in a number of respects. A high proportion were educated to degree level (83%) and around a quarter of these also held some kind of postgraduate qualification. Most (69%) were recent ‘incomers’ to the area in which they lived. In 70% of families, at least one parent worked in the public sector. The parents in the study were strongly represented on school governing bodies: There were 11 chairs of governors in the sample, and in 57% of the London families at least one parent was currently serving or had served as a school governor. Riverton and Norton figures were lower but still substantial, at 43% and 22% respectively. In most cases, becoming a school governor was rooted in a desire to make a civic contribution, though as we found with the many other explicit connections with schools (friendships with teachers or the Head, or professional links with education), being a school governor was at the same time a way of monitoring and intervening in schooling. In turn, schools seemed especially responsive to the wishes and concerns of white middle-class parents and their children, and in part of the analysis of the project we argue that there was a

particular mutual affinity between the accountability needs of the school and the wishes of this particular group of parents, a point returned to below.

An important strand in UK policy for the last 15 years or so has sought to place schools at the heart of initiatives to realise greater social inclusion and to build a greater sense of community: the Extended Schools initiative was one prominent example of this (Cummings et al., 2007). Partly in the light of such policies, we were interested to see whether ‘against the grain’ school choice made a positive contribution to social mixing and, therefore, potentially, to social cohesion. We found segregation *within* schools with white middle-class children clustered in top sets, in most cases benefiting from ‘Gifted and Talented’ schemes,² and little interaction with children from other backgrounds. The children rarely had working-class friends and their few minority ethnic friends were predominantly from middle-class backgrounds. Overall, there was some evidence of *social mix* but little evidence of *social mixing*. Parents often declared their hopes that their children would make friends across ethnic groups, and sometimes they intervened to facilitate this, but on the whole friends were other white middle-class children. Both parents’ and children’s attitudes to classed and ethnic others sometimes displayed a perception of cultural and intellectual superiority that would work against social cohesion and the development of common ground and common understandings. For many of the parents in the study (and especially in London) the wish for their children to have a multicultural educational experience was closely connected to how they identified as white. The data suggest that their own identity was constructed in opposition to that of both white working-class people and those white middle-class people making more conventional choices of secondary school. Rather, these parents saw themselves as part of a more culturally tolerant and even anti-racist white middle class (see Reay et al., 2007).

Against-the-grain school choice was for the most part experienced as a risky strategy, and it generated considerable anxiety that we found was linked to parents’ attempts to monitor and manage the process (see Crozier et al., 2008). The accounts of many of the parents suggested immense difficulties in acting ethically in an unethical context. At the same time, however, we were surprised by the extent to which both the specificity of school choice and more general issues of inequality were seen in individualised, instrumental terms. Once under way, school experiences were very closely monitored and managed, and some parents described how they could and would ‘pull out’ if things did not go well, suggesting they saw school choice as remaining provisional, and the school as a service provider and themselves as consumers who could keep the choice of provider under review. Schooling was seen as one element (albeit the largest element) in a broader educational project, and this led us to suggest that the metaphor of a ‘risky investment’ was apposite. The school choices made could and did produce high gains, but parents exercised high levels of vigilance and often engaged in close monitoring through roles and relationships that gave them close proximity to schooling.

Refusal of a mainstream misrecognition

In ‘mainstream choosing’, the measurement and comparison of a specific set of secondary school examination results, together with published Inspection outcomes, is intended by policy-makers to provide the information needed in a market in which people will make informed choices. Middle-class parents appear to be the ideal

consumers here because they are likely to be in a position to make choices that will place their children in the best situation for academic achievement.³ General strategies may include moving home before the date used by the local authority to define place of residence, with the purpose of being nearer to (or further away from) a particular school. Some families move house well ahead of the period in which they are required to ‘choose’, which when the day comes makes the choice appear uncomplicated (in Bourdieusian terms, ‘natural’). Others will fight hard for places in specific, high-performing schools, and as well as house purchase and moving home this may include renting an extra address, paying for private schooling, renewing religious allegiances and so forth. The stakes are sufficiently high for some families to resort to fraud or deception, such as using a false address so that they appear to live closer to a desired school (BBC, 2008; Harvey, 2008).

In contrast to such strategies of ‘mainstream choosing’, the families in our sample were on the whole highly suspicious and/or critical of the main indicators via which schools are compared, and of the associated league tables. Many felt that dominant, conventional measures of school quality (particular groupings of the results of General Certificate of Secondary Education [GCSE] examinations) were invalid as indicators of the quality of education on offer in any particular school, since they would mainly depend on the school’s intake rather than on educational processes. As one put it, they were interested in what their own child would achieve, not what the class or year group would achieve. Our analysis here led us to suggest that the policies designed to engender ‘choice’ and ‘markets’ operated with too crude a conception of choice. In other words, they treat schooling as if it were the same as buying a washing machine, and imply that all schools can be arranged, ultimately, on a single continuum from best to worst. By contrast, the parents in our study appeared to see schooling in *much* broader terms, as something more akin to their only real shot, beyond the home, of shaping their child’s fundamental dispositions, or habitus. We found Andrew Sayer’s distinction between *preferences* and *commitments* (Sayer, 2005) especially useful in trying to grasp this gulf between policy assumptions and actual practices in the realm of school choice:

What we have termed parental managerialism ... sees parents putting great efforts into constructing a broad educational project in which actual school choice is just one element, albeit the most important single feature. Such parents have a *commitment* to particular notions of society and to particular kinds of socialisation: Their choices make sense in relation to their commitments. (Reay, Crozier, & James, 2011, pp. 70–71)

The ‘particular kinds of socialisation’ are a frequent feature of the interview data, and strongly linked to the parents’ own educational experiences. Examples include parents describing their wishes thus:

I don’t want my children to think you know, that everybody’s got a holiday house in Sardinia, and everyone’s daddy drives a four by four ... and everyone you know can go to tennis club and squash club and blah, blah, blah, have holidays skiing and this that and the other. You know, they’ve got to realise that ... not everyone does that, we’re not all the same ... and I just think, God, if everybody would just go to state schools it would be so much better, but a lot of people don’t. (Audrey)⁴

There is definitely something about producing a different kind of middle-class child. This is a speculation but I think there is definitely something about not being arrogant or not appearing arrogant. There is some kind of modesty that some people might see as them not being confident. You are not being educated to be a woman of the world; you are being educated to take your part, a place. And I think there is an understanding

of others you can only have if you are sort of with them all the time. It is something to learn of other cultures, but to actually learn with other cultures, of other cultures, it is a completely different thing. (Avril)

The interviews are peppered with examples that speak of a much greater educational project than that signalled by examination outcomes, and a common element of this was a desire to avoid the perceived (and, often, formerly experienced) social homogeneity of more selective school settings so as to create a more resilient, socially fluent young person equipped to thrive in a multicultural society. There was also disdain for those other parents who appeared driven by league table position in their choice of secondary school. In sum, then, these parents are 'seeing through' the myth of the market, refusing to reduce something as complex as an educational process to the dominant single indicator of quality, and acting in accordance with some strongly held values and conceptions of the educational project.

The persistence of misrecognition

However, our analysis also suggests that, in the convoluted relationship between social class, education and inequality, the attempt to act ethically in unethical circumstances produces social practices characterised by other forms of misrecognition. In one interview, we had been talking about whether, in retrospect, the choice of school had been a good one to have made:

Father: I feel vindicated...

Mother: Yes, I do (too)

Father: ... in that because our feeling is that we're not interested in results, we're not interested in percentages of A–Cs, what we're interested in is what our own children are going to achieve. So it could be that a year group do appallingly, but if the teachers have given our children *the opportunity to rise to their natural place* and get the qualifications that they're capable of, a good teacher will work with children and if they have *one bright child* in that class they should be able to take them *where they need to go*. (Tom & Trudy – emphases added)

The interviews with parents contained many mentions of 'bright' and 'brightness', plus a number of close synonyms including having something 'extra' or being 'special'. This was linked to certainty about capability and key elements of the child's future trajectory, and also sometimes to denigration of the white working class, and a contrasting admiration for the 'bright and ambitious' amongst some minority ethnic children. Middle-class 'brightness' was the main way in which middle-class distinction was characterised and expressed:

Across 251 interview transcripts there were a staggering 256 references to brightness, made by parents, and to a lesser extent their children, without prompting by the interviewers. We would argue that such discourses, which position middle-class brightness as both normative and a justification for middle-class privilege, are one of the main means through which the middle classes defensively use their own investments in class hierarchies to distinguish themselves as superior to others.... Brightness then becomes a rationalisation for holding on to more: educationally, socially and economically. Furthermore, investment in brightness defends against the fear of failure. For the white middle classes educational failure is often intolerable and needs to be projected elsewhere. (Reay, Crozier, & James, 2011, pp. 117–118)

It would not be unreasonable to say that, collectively, most of these ‘against the grain’ choosers were *so confident* about the brightness of their children that they felt justified in making the riskier investment in the average or lower-performing secondary school. This may be described using the Freudian notion of ‘splitting’ (in which information that challenges the integrity of the ego is dealt with by disavowal: so any responsibility for inequalities, being shameful, is projected onto subordinate groups). On the other hand (or as well) it can be understood as a form of *misrecognition*, a regular feature of educational processes, in which the institutional welcome, nurturance and certification of certain sets of dispositions (relative to others) is reinterpreted as the result of natural difference rather than socially maintained difference. In other words, in the right circumstances, children will ‘rise to their natural place’.

This theme is closely linked to another, which we called the mutual affinity apparent between the relatively isolated white-middle class child in many of the schools, and the needs of the schools in highly performative conditions. To put it crudely, head teachers wanted middle-class kids and would go to great lengths to attract and keep them. Meanwhile, parents were quite demanding of teachers and head teachers, and many of their demands were met: they got a particularly good ‘service’, often bolstered, as mentioned earlier, with the extra resources coming through the ‘Gifted and Talented’ scheme. Both parents and schools were acting – at least indirectly – with knowledge derived from social science concerning the relationship of social class and educational outcomes.

The concept of misrecognition, then, helps us to unpack a series of partially shared rationales amongst the parents and families, in which they rejected GCSE results, a mainstream indicator of quality of secondary schooling, because of its poor compass in relation to what they valued about schooling. At the same time, the concept of misrecognition enabled an exploration of other senses in which parents’ perceptions of the young person and engagements with the school (and education more generally) appeared to serve their interests well beyond those that were immediately apparent. This suggests it would be a mistake to see parents like those in the study who have rejected ‘league table thinking’ as *simply* more enlightened than their mainstream-chooser counterparts. There may well be a complex array of other types of misrecognition at stake in the relationship between middle-class families and schools. To put this another way, it may take more than a rejection of ‘league table thinking’ to challenge or even disturb the intricate and convoluted processes by which, from a Bourdieusian perspective, social difference is converted through educational action so that it appears naturally-occurring and thoroughly explicable via reference to individual differences in motivation and intelligence. As some earlier work in Finland demonstrated, notions of intelligence are a fundamental building-block in educational discourse and representations of educability (see Raty & Snellman, 1998).

Reflexivity and recognising tensions

As a team conducting the above project we commented that the project had been:

... a difficult, sometimes painful process. Many of the research team could be described as white, urban-dwelling, first-generation middle class. Researching the white middle classes was often like holding a mirror to the self. We were confronted with our own culpability, failings, conceits and self-deceptions. (Reay, Crozier, & James, 2011, p. 167)

This kind of reflexivity is important and, in Bourdieusian terms, central to achieving any kind of scientific insight (Grenfell & James, 1998). What does it really mean to be sociologically reflexive if one is deeply engaged in educational activities? I want to suggest that there is a fundamental dissonance between a Bourdieusian approach and some widely held values and goals of educational endeavour (and some educational research), and that these can be articulated as four ‘areas of tension’.

First, there are tensions around *interest and proximity*. In educational research, many are accustomed to regarding personal or professional proximity to educational processes as a bonus, albeit one that needs careful handling. The whole ‘teacher as researcher’ tradition, and much of the work collectively known as ‘action research’ in the educational community, relies heavily on the longstanding methodological pivot of dealing with familiarity by making it strange (see for example Atkinson, et al., 2003; Sikes, 2003, 2006). However, in Bourdieu’s social theory, this is not enough. To do social science, we need to achieve an analysis of our own position vis-à-vis the object of study. This means recognising that as, say, teachers we have *interests* that limit what we (and a good number of other teachers) can easily see. The same point can be made in respect of parents, children, policy-makers, politicians, civil servants and indeed researchers. There is a need, one might say, to make the strange familiar. Where someone is accustomed to seeing their daily and strenuous efforts as an educator in generally positive terms, it will seem difficult and quite possibly perverse to be asking in what sense they are part of a system that generates inequalities.

Second, there are tensions around *the unit of analysis*. In education, although people usually do things in groups, we are accustomed to dealing with individuals, who are the prime unit of nurturing, encouragement, achievement, reward, celebration, accountability and so forth. This is partly an observation about Anglo-Saxon culture, but we should note that the growth of psychology (and especially educational psychology and, within this, psychometrics) is roughly coterminous with the rise of state educational provision, and there is a longstanding interweaving of psychological concepts, measurements and conceptions of the person in educational policy, especially in assessment. This is probably one reason that individualistic conceptions of the self, which are axiomatic in neo-liberal thinking, appear to be accepted in many educational settings. This is not to say Bourdieu was uninterested in individuals: he put enormous amounts of effort into emancipatory projects that sought to improve the lives of many people. Rather, it is to make a more mundane but crucial point, which is that individuals are not the primary unit of analysis for Bourdieu. As he once put it:

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)

Those dealing mainly in educational practice and policy may object to knowledge and insight that refers to people not as individuals *qua* individuals, but for their part in social practices which are indicative of fields, capitals, positions, relationships or tendencies. Following Mey (1972), I would liken this perspectival ‘shift to the relational’ to that between Newtonian and Einsteinian physics. However, some in education will find it disrespectful or otherwise objectionable that social researchers do not always take the testimony of participants at face value, or impute motives that people themselves do not directly express, acknowledge or even recognise. Thus, practices that appear self-evidently good or ‘the way things are’ in an educational

setting might, from another perspective, show themselves to both respond to and reproduce structural inequalities.

Third, and related to the above, there are tensions around *compass* or *scale*. Whilst a sociological account drawing on Bourdieu may attempt to theorise how aspects of home background give advantages to some students and disadvantages to others, the boundaries of the issue will need to be more tightly drawn where it is considered as a problem for educational practice or policy. To put this another way, even if practitioners and policy-makers accept the Bourdieusian account, what elements of the complex array of practices, structures and relationships would they consider are in their purview? What are the excellent teachers in a relatively low-attaining school to take from an account that shows that their efforts can amount to so little in mainstream terms? For all its practical derivation and relevance, the *compass* of a Bourdieusian analysis is not, in this instance at least, likely to lend itself to ‘reading off’ recipes for action.

This brings us to the fourth – and arguably most important – tension between an analysis derived from Bourdieu’s theoretical tools, and the worlds of education, educational practitioners and to some extent educational researchers. I will call this a tension around *tenor*, and it centres on a deceptively simple distinction between optimism and pessimism. Whilst many working in education have become highly disillusioned, many others have not, and both popular and academic literatures on teaching and leadership continue to underline the importance of enthusiasm and other forms of positivity. In addition, a diverse range of initiatives bear witness to a seemingly inexhaustible appetite for innovation. Some initiatives are large scale and ‘top down’ (e.g. policies like Every Child Matters, and Extended Schools in the UK) whilst others are more local and ‘bottom up’ (e.g. the Royal Society of Arts’ Area Based Curriculum in the UK – see James, 2012). Yet others are best understood as the ‘bottom up’ invention and performance of ‘top down’ requirements (see for example Jones and Thomson’s excellent analysis of the now-terminated Creative Partnerships scheme in England – Jones & Thomson, 2008). Perhaps due to the absence of shared purposes at the system level (Pring et al., 2009), an endemic reluctance to engage in problematising the ends of education or a tendency to prioritise technical over cultural aspects in collecting and using evidence of ‘what works’ (Biesta, 2007), these movements often encapsulate a collective imagination of what education could be or should be. For a time they appear to hold out the possibility of great change for the better in schooling, and/or solutions to problems that go well beyond the normal functions of schooling. For some of those involved, such educational visions are congenitally, sometimes infectiously, optimistic about what is possible and achievable through educational processes.

Through a Bourdieusian lens, such movements continually overestimate the capacity to act to bring about genuine change. Arguably, this tells us as much about Bourdieu’s social theory as it does about the interests, values and world-views of educationists. Bourdieu’s approach is largely a sociology of domination, bringing with it a strong concept of power, and whilst there is plenty of scope for agency it also illustrates limits and tends towards pessimism. This has been noted many times, by both critics and advocates of Bourdieu’s approach. An early example of the former would be Paul Willis, for whom Bourdieu ‘presents, finally, a gloomy, enclosed Weberian world of no-escape. There is no theoretical basis for a politics of change, for the production of alternatives or radical consciousness’ (Willis, 1983, p. 121) (though as Walker argues, this overstates the case and Willis’s own grounds for

optimism can be shown to rely on an unwarranted romantic view of a particular form of working-class culture – see Walker, 2007). Even one of the most positive accounts of Bourdieu's work notes 'an element of fatalism or, perhaps of reluctant cosmic conservatism' (Robbins, 1991, p. 175). Yet whilst there can be little doubt that Bourdieu represents a tendency to pessimism, it would be wrong to see this as some kind of theoretical fatal flaw, for three reasons. First, until we have firmer grounds for optimism, the tendency may be warranted (cf. Walker, 2007); second, the tendency does not of itself prevent change-for-the better; and third, to position it as a 'flaw' would suggest a banal and mistaken view of the nature of Bourdieusian theory. Many (including Bourdieu himself) have pointed out that the work does not offer a grand theoretical system, but rather it is a set of related theoretical tools (albeit an 'impressively consistent' one – Calhoun, 2014) developed over time via empirical work.

Conclusion

I started by indicating that, when it comes to Bourdieu, there is great variety in 'depth-in-use', and that some connections that are made with Bourdieu's concepts in educational research are superficial. Such usage probably helps to sustain suspicions – outside and sometimes inside academic institutions – that when it comes to educational matters, theory is some kind of optional, ultimately dispensable, gloss. However, 'light' usage may not always indicate a lack of application or seriousness on the part of the researcher. First, it may be a product of the ease with which Bourdieusian concepts can be confused with others that sound similar, a point I have illustrated with the concept of misrecognition. Second, and as indicated by the four potential areas of tension identified, there is much scope for the misrecognition (in the true Bourdieusian sense) of this especially strong form of sociological reasoning when it clashes with elements of the *doxa* of the educational field, including many firmly held values. When educationists become critical social researchers, they must find ways of reconciling or living with such tensions; they must begin to subject themselves and their educational assumptions to new forms of scrutiny, to take steps to 'dislodge their thinking' (Stich, 2012). The task here is so much more than the conventionally understood one of trying to minimise the distorting effects of one's values (Greenbank, 2003) and its difficulty cannot be overstated, as many a former or current teacher on an education-related Doctoral programme would testify. There is evidence that it is worth the struggle and the end results can be distinctive, practical and worthwhile (see e.g. Anyon et al., 2009; James, 2010).

It would appear that there is no such thing as a convincing 'light' adoption of Bourdieusian tools. They cannot be used as if we were ignorant or unconcerned about how, in schools and other settings, educational processes naturalise social differences. Their use entails acknowledgement that people working in education may be unwitting (or perhaps, semi-witting) agents of inequality, whatever their motives and despite what else their actions achieve. Furthermore, a Bourdieusian perspective includes considering how, like other professionals, educationists (and educational researchers) will have collective interests that include maintaining certain arrangements and a demand for their services. Whilst the approach can provide great insight, its tendency to produce pessimism may dampen some of the enthusiasm that is so often a fundamental constituent of educational endeavour, whether at classroom or policy level. For such reasons, even the most reflexive educational professional

and the most broad-minded educational policy-maker are likely to find Bourdieusian research difficult to ‘do’ and difficult to ‘hear’, regardless of how ultimately practical or useful it might actually be.

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Notes

1. Both ‘Riverton’ and ‘Norton’ are pseudonyms.
2. Described at the time of the study on the UK Government Department for Children, Schools and Families ‘Standards’ website thus: ‘Gifted and talented children are those who have one or more abilities developed to a level significantly ahead of their year group (or with the potential to develop these abilities). In England the term “gifted” refers to those pupils who are capable of excelling in academic subjects such as English or History. “Talented” refers to those pupils who may excel in areas requiring visio-spatial skills or practical abilities, such as in games and PE, drama, or art’. *The Guidance Note Identifying Gifted and Talented Learners – getting started* was revised in 2008 and is now available at <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/Getting%20StartedWR.pdf> (accessed January 11, 2014).
3. The system in England combines choice and entitlement. See https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/203,221/Schools_Choice_Framework.pdf (accessed January 11, 2014).
4. All participants are given pseudonyms.

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