

# Mobilising Bourdieu to think anew about educational leadership research

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Mobilising the work of Pierre Bourdieu in my scholarship has led me to asking questions of the canons of my disciplinary space (educational leadership, management and administration) and pose serious methodological inquiry around the construction and ongoing maintenance of central research objects (e.g. leadership). Significantly, it has eroded the somewhat arbitrary division between theory and method and sustained a generative research program concerned with the ongoing legitimation of the social world and its empirical manifestation in the organising of education and educational labour. Engaging with, rather than necessarily overcoming, the methodological challenges in Bourdieu's work provide the basis for a rigorous and robust social 'science'.

While I have mobilised Bourdieu's key thinking tools of *habitus*, *fields* and *capitals*, and the lesser used *strategies*, my path to Bourdieusian thinking was not through the usual routes. My initial engagement was as a methodological – as in the coming together of theory and method – resource more so than a conceptual toolkit. As a result, when engaging with thinking through my usage of Bourdieusian thought and analysis in constructing method, my attention shifts mostly to what Bourdieusian thinking offers as a way of thinking about research and the research object.

The *relational* approach to scholarship in educational leadership, management and administration that I am advancing (see Eacott, 2015) is very much rooted in Bourdieusian thinking. However, my use of Bourdieusian theorising is neither with utmost loyalty or reverence. I take Bourdieu serious in his claim that his work is constantly updated through ongoing scholarship. My interest in the theoretical problem of the legitimation of the social world and its empirical manifestation in the organising of education and educational labour draw heavily on my reading of Bourdieu, yet at the same time the challenges of mobilising Bourdieu in a new space have led to me thinking it anew.

Bourdieu's work on epistemological preliminaries, in particular the breaking with ordinary language (following Gaston Bachelard, 1984[1934]) and epistemic/empirical objects casts doubt over the canonical 'leadership'. In bringing Bourdieu into a different time and space, as he never explicitly wrote about educational administration per se, has required a rethinking of temporality and spatial politics. Engaging with these conceptual problems leads to work at the forefront of contemporary thought and analysis through contributions that stimulate dialogue and debate in the interest of advancing scholarship. This chapter outlines the various ways in which Bourdieusian thinking has forced me to think anew the construction of my research object and how I can methodologically capture matters of temporality and space.

## Finding Bourdieu

As with many doctoral candidates (and faculty I might add) working in the intellectual space that is educational leadership, management and administration during the early stages of my doctorate I was primarily working in an instrumental (almost atheoretical) analytical framework. However, as my candidature progressed I reached a point where the (a)theoretical resources I had engaged with during my master's (also in educational leadership) and that populated the many of the journals of the discipline were not enabling me to do the sort of work I wanted to do in relation to how school leaders thought and acted strategically. That is, I needed an analytical lens that could engage with the theoretical problem of the legitimation of practices and its empirical manifestation rather than just the latter.

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As a result of the work of, and engaging with, other doctoral candidates in the department, I began reading Michel Foucault, particularly around governmentality, the panopticon, and on strategy. I also revisited some of the key thinkers I came across during my master's program, notably those from Deakin University (Victoria, Australia) during the 1980-90s such as Richard Bates, Jill Blackmore and John Smyth, whose work was built upon a foundation of critical social theory (see Tinning & Sirna, 2011). It was however during a conversation with James Ladwig (who ended up supervising my doctorate) that he suggested Bourdieu's work on strategy might be what I was after. He gave me a copy of *From rules to strategies* – an interview between Bourdieu and Pierre Lamaison (1986) published in *Cultural Anthropology* and then later in the collection, *In other words* (Bourdieu, 1990). It was at this point I was hooked.

This path to Bourdieu is significant. Unlike many education researchers who come to Bourdieu through *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977[1970]), *The state nobility* (Bourdieu, 1996[1989]), or for those in higher education, *Homo academicus* (Bourdieu, 1988[1984]), and in doing so frequently equate Bourdieu with reproduction, I came to him as a theoretical or more precisely a methodological, resource. My reading of Bourdieu as a resource came less from *An invitation to reflexive sociology* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992[1992]), and more from *Pascalian meditations* (Bourdieu, 2000[1997]), *The social structures of the economy* (Bourdieu, 2005[2000]), and, arguably most important, *The craft of sociology: epistemological preliminaries* (Bourdieu, Chamboredon & Passeron, 1991[1968]). The distinction, to think with Bourdieu, was that my initial engagement with Bourdieusian thinking was not to mobilise a key set of thinking tools but to think *with* Bourdieu. This is not to say I have not played with *habitus*, *capital* and *fields* – as doing so is something of a rite of passage for Bourdieusian scholars – but that this mobilisation of Bourdieu did not enable me to push my thought and analysis to where I wanted it to go. This also meant that my engagement with scholars working with Bourdieusian thinking was important. Using Elizabeth Silva and Alan Warde's (2010) classification system of Bourdieusian scholars, I was less intrigued by the 'defenders of the legacy' (e.g. Michael Grenfell) or the 'partial appropriators' (which Will Atkinson (2012) labels as a 'British speciality' (p. 170)), and more interested in the 'critical revisers' and 'repudiators'. This is not surprising given that what I sought was a rigorous and robust approach to social science, but not one that simply replaced one master narrative with another, rather an approach to scholarship that enabled me to think anew. Therefore, despite Bourdieu writing in a different time and space, it is in bringing his approach to scholarship face-to-face with the challenges of the here and now that was attractive. As James Ladwig (1996) argues, built within the very French Durkheimian sociological tradition, Bourdieu's methodological stance begins from the epistemological presumption that (in Poincare's words) 'facts do not speak'. My mobilisation of Bourdieusian thinking is guided by my singular (theoretical and empirical) task of trying to describe what I see happening in the scholarship of educational leadership, management and administration, the disciplinary space to which I pledge allegiance. This means I pay as much attention to the field of knowledge production as I do the field of practice.

Despite earlier claims about the minimal use of Bourdieu in educational leadership studies (Lingard & Christie, 2003), there is an increasing corpus of work based in Bourdieusian thinking. It has been the basis of works on school reform/policy (Gunter, 2012), leadership preparation and development (Eacott, 2011), leadership standards (English, 2012), strategy (Eacott, 2010), autonomy (Thomson, 2010), educational leadership at large (Thomson, 2015), and the intellectual *field* of educational administration (Gunter, 2002). Consistent with the re-emergence of a strong sociological tradition in educational leadership studies (Eacott, 2015b; Gunter, 2010) and the critical social theory strength of Australia and New Zealand (Bates, 2010; Eacott, 2013), it is defensible to argue that there is a group of scholars on an international scale thinking with Bourdieu. Herein lays a challenge for those new to Bourdieu in educational leadership, management and administration. First, there is the temptation to simply grab Bourdieu's thinking tools and build research around that. This is problematic as Atkinson (2012) argues, Bourdieu is not to be ransacked, selectively applied, mashed with other ideas and twisted as empirical findings dictate. Similarly, Grenfell (2010)

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notes that Bourdieu's concepts are 'epistemologically charged' (p. 26), bounded by a set of philosophical assumptions and disregard for this limits them to meaningless descriptive vocabulary. This is central to Karl Maton's (2008) argument against adjectival *habitus*, claiming that the need for the adjective is evidence of the lack of work around context.

It is through my original engagement with Bourdieu and Bourdieusian thinking that has enabled me to overcome the novelty of the great thinker. As Lisa Adkins (2011) argues, overlaying a theory or mapping a terrain with Bourdieu leaves the existing theorisation intact, even if explained differently. What I sought was the theoretical resources to not only challenge the hegemonic discourse but to provide an alternate, one that would engage with blind spots in existing theorisations and open up new directions and frontiers for thought and analysis. This I found in tracing the logic of Bourdieu's analysis of classification struggles and thinking relationally rather than looking at his substantive findings. That is, Bourdieu provided me with the foundations of an approach to scholarship. Most importantly, my rather unorthodox coming to Bourdieu – or at least for my area – has meant that Bourdieusian thinking has inspired me to think anew the educational leadership, management and administration project. It forced me to think of the organising of education and educational labour not in the sense of improving productivity and practice, something rooted in Frederick Winslow Taylor's (1911) *Principles of scientific management* and reinforced through the systems thinking that dominates educational administration, but as one concerned with legitimation. This subtle shift gives charge to the underlying generative principles of practice, those which are shaping and shaped by how we come to know, do and be educational labour.

### Thinking with Bourdieu

My unorthodox coming to Bourdieu led me to believe that in Bourdieusian thinking we can find important resources for understanding the contemporary organising of education and educational labour. However, unlike common uses which privilege *habitus*, *field*, and *capital*, I argue that the theoretical resources of greatest potency are those which may need certain refinement and modifications, and even if at first sight, those resources appear to have minimal if any connection to or resonance with contemporary dialogue and debates. In particular, I contend that thinking with Bourdieu has enabled me to engage with some of the enduring critiques of educational leadership, management and administration studies.

While reading Bourdieu's (2005[2000]) *The social structures of the economy* an argument that caught my attention was the notion of 'native theories'. Bourdieu uses the example of management theory. A literature produced by business schools for business schools and likened that to the writing of European jurists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who in the guise of describing the state, contributed to building it. This led me to asking, are the literatures of educational leadership, management and administration any different? Historically, had educational administration not sought to distant itself from education with the establishment of departments in the early 1900s? Had it not further legitimised itself through specialist journals, separate conferences, associations and networks? Asking these questions forced me to ponder on Bourdieu's contention that an important element in scholarship is to *take as one's object the social work of construction of the pre-constructed object* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992[1992]). As with Bourdieu, I seek to cast doubt on orthodoxy, or, to make the familiar strange. This is a necessary, and important, task when working in the social world that the researcher is involved. It is about getting beyond the confirmation of a pre-scientific orientation to the social world. As Bourdieu (2000[1997]) notes:

... it is clear that, to secure some chance of really knowing what one is doing, one has to unfold what is inscribed in the various relations of implication in which the thinker and his thought are caught up, that is, the presuppositions he engages and the inclusions or exclusions he unwittingly performs (p. 99).

This epistemological vigilance is particularly necessary in the social sciences, where the separation between the everyday language and opinion of the spontaneous sociologist and the scientific

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discourse of the researcher is more blurred than elsewhere (Bourdieu, Chamboredon & Passeron, 1991[1968]). It is familiarity with the social world, the ongoing struggle with the spontaneous understanding of the everyday that is the central epistemological obstacle for educational administration as it continuously produces conceptualisations (e.g. organisational structures, leadership) and at the same time, the conditions which serve to legitimise and sustain them – native theories. The choice of problem, the elaboration of concepts and analytical categories function as a ratification of the everyday experience of organising unless the crucial operation of scientific construction breaks with the social world *as it is* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992[1992], p. 248). Therefore, thinking with Bourdieu forces me to submit to scientific scrutiny everything that makes the everyday experience of the world possible. This includes not only the pre-scientific representation of the social but also the cognitive schemata that underlie the construction of the image (Eacott, 2014).

The challenge Bourdieu, Chamboredon and Passeron (1991[1968]) raise, following Gaston Bachelard (1984[1934]), around epistemological vigilance, or the epistemological break, centres on Bachelard denying science the certainties of a definitive heritage and reminding us that it (science) can only progress by perpetually calling into question the very principles of its own constructs. As an intellectual space, educational administration has morphed into educational management and now educational leadership. While it is possible to map these against temporal and spatial markers, I am not going to do that for reasons which will become clearly shortly, these shifts are marked through a demonising of the previous label in some form of evolutionary track. What has always struck me about these shifting titles has been that while the labels, or fads, have changed, I am not as convinced the empirical focus of study has. That is, no-one has yet to convince me of why if I were to use educational administration as my preferred label that I am wrong. I do get told by editors and reviewers that my work cannot be published until I update it to reflect contemporary times, but no-one has been able to provide a definitive response as to why administration, or management, are wrong and ‘leadership’ is right. As Klaus Weber argues, we should study fads and fashions and not chase them (Birkinshaw, Healey, Suddaby & Weber, 2014). Bourdieu’s work provides a variety of resources for engaging in this space. Notably, work around the epistemological break in *The craft of sociology* provides ways of thinking about the construction of the research object. In doing so, it opens up analysis to the *doxic* modality in which we come to understand the pre-scientific world and that without paying attention to such matters, it is possible, if not likely, that we remain within the pre-scientific and further legitimate the *doxa*. In many ways, a similar argument, but not as nuanced, is raised by Fenwick English (2006) who contends that advancing educational administration requires criticism of it, philosophically, empirically and logically, suggesting that we do not search for core pillars but the contested grounds on which educational leadership is defined moment-to-moment. Building from this attention to the break with the everyday, Bourdieusian thinking has also forced me to engage with notion of science and scientific inquiry.

The labels of ‘science’ and ‘scientific’ have a long association with educational administration as a field of knowledge production and practice. The establishment of departments of educational administration in US universities loosely aligns with the publication of Taylor’s (1911) classic, which was central to early programs. Taylor, like other classic administration / management thinkers such as Lyall Urwick and Henri Fayol, were practice-based inquirers rather than scholars. That is, the mobilisation of science was about rationalisation and logic of process rather than an epistemological or ontological perspective of understanding the world. They were about chasing the latest ‘what works’, or to use Taylor’s language ‘one best practice’, rather than asking questions about under what conditions is it possible to think such things. Bourdieu offers a way of sustaining, if not advancing, scientific inquiry without submitting to the notion of objectivity and distance between the researcher and researched, or remaining within the ordinary language of the pre-scientific. This is because Bourdieu’s belief in science is not the science of mainstream Anglophone employment, that which is mostly tied to logical empiricism and displaying an ‘exhibitionism of data and procedures’ rather he believes, as noted earlier, ‘one would be better advised to display the

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conditions of construction and analysis of these data' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992[1992]), p. 65). Bourdieu's view of science, or more specifically scientific inquiry, sees it as an act of distinction from ordinary language and the under-problematised view of the social world. This way of thinking led me to explicitly ask questions of the contemporarily popular construct of educational administration – 'leadership' (Eacott, 2013). In focusing less on trying to capture and measure 'leadership' I asked questions as to what exactly is it we mean when we mobilise the label 'leadership', and how do we bring it into being through method. This was not about operational definitions, that which create boundaries for inquiry prior to commencing, rather it is about the very construction of the research object. Thinking with Bourdieu enabled me to identify 'leadership' as an epistemic construct, or methodological artefact, whose criteria of existence is defined *a priori* yet whose identification of presence is done post-event. That is, Bourdieusian thinking facilitated me thinking anew the core research object of my disciplinary space and in doing so generated more questions about what it means to know or empirically ground my scholarship.

Taking such a stance in my scholarship has been somewhat problematic. As a disciplinary space, educational leadership, management and administration has hung very tightly to notions of being an applied field and needing to have actionable outcomes from research. An integral feature of this professionalization of knowledge production is the discrediting of intellectual work (such as the critique and analysis of the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of research objects) as exotic, indulgent and not in the public interest (Gunter, 2013). Yet herein lays a tension. There is a hegemonic position that context matters in educational administration – this is despite the search for a universal 'leadership' to resolve all issues, but that is another matter – however, as Jill Blackmore (2004) argues that to understand how educational leadership, management and administration are 'perceived, understood and enacted, one has to have a sense of the broader social, economic and political relations shaping educational work' (p. 267). This is where once again I found Bourdieu to offer the theoretical resources to engage.

To think with Bourdieu, practice is shaped by and shaping of the contemporary conditions. As a result, any practice which we may come to know as 'leadership' is grounded in a particular time and space. Assumptions regarding its utility across space or its stability through time are cast into radical doubt. This is an area to which educational leadership, management and administration has not seriously engaged with at scale. A key exception is Eugenie Samier. She argues that, consistent with its parent discipline of public administration, educational administration exhibits a propensity for ahistorical accounts of practice whereas these accounts should be thought of as administration under historical conditions.

As an intellectual space, educational leadership, management and administration has an interesting engagement with notions of time or temporality. For the most part, the leadership industry has built itself on a conceptualisation of time that is focused on the present and a desired future, where the distance between the two entities is measured in clock time. Bourdieusian notions of temporality are contrary to such conceptualisation. Bourdieu gives greater privilege to the present, but this is grounded in historicising practice. All of the Bourdieusian concepts mobilise history. This is not the causal claims of rational action theory, but one of conditioning what is and is not possible. This is what makes reproduction based accounts of institutional arrangements a relatively easy case to make. However this is not to be mistaken for essentialist accounts where the realm of possible outcomes is already decided. Much like how Bourdieu was against the artificial partitioning of the social world in ways which serve the classifiers purposes more so than reflect an empirical reality, the partitioning of historical periods is counter to Bourdieusian thinking. The historicising of practice is more about why under these conditions are such actions taking place. As Michael Savage (2009) notes:

... it is not about understanding why someone is doing something, rather to relate actions to other actions, rather than causal relations, this is about unfolding an elaborated description of the ongoing politic work of organisations (p. 163).

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The shift in temporal thinking here is from clock time – that which is reducible to units of the clock, an external narrative of time overlaid *on* practice – to event time, one grounded in action and unfolding *with* practice. Lisa Adkins (2011) provides an account of this shifting temporal thought in relation to the global financial crisis building from Bourdieu's (2000[1997]) writings on time in *Pascalian meditations*. The shift in thinking makes the comparison of objects (e.g. schools) across space as though they exist in the same temporal conditions as a flawed pursuit. It is a place based trajectory and the configuration of actors (both material and symbolic) that is privileged.

Place as a notion is far from static. At the time of his death, Bourdieu argued that globalisation was *doxic*. This is an important move in a conceptualisation of space. Notions of the nation-state, those somewhat arbitrary boundaries constructed by people to divide the terrain in ways that served their purposes more so than anything else, have become increasingly blurred with global discourses of policy borrowing – or even plagiarising – as part of a larger comparative turn in global public (and especially, education) policy. A key shift in thinking here, and one pivotal to working with Bourdieu, is from an entity to a relational ontology. This serves to breakdown binaries at all levels of the analysis. The entity based ontology that is hegemonic in educational leadership, management and administration, with roots in systems thinking, has arguably reached its limits. Partitions based on individual and collective, and structure and agency, become redundant when working relationally. It is important to note that not all uses of relational are ontological, and that there are multiple schools of thought with relational ontologies. Both the entity and the relational ontologies are based on relations/relationships, it is the interplay that creates distinctions. From an entity perspective, the social world is made up of a series of independent, even if related, entities. These entities can be mapped against one another, often in two-dimensional diagrams with arrows, some double-headed, representing the various relationships and their strengths. In contrast, a relational ontology, and consistent with Bourdieusian thinking, we come to know the world relationally. The constitution of particular objects is only made possible in relation to other objects. That is, we cannot have one without the other. To remove one object, as would be possible with an entity perspective, would reconfigure the other, therefore rendering the need for a new description of the object and its constitution. This is one reason why the artificial partitioning of *habitus*, *field* and *capital* in studies is somewhat counter to Bourdieusian thinking. While this may sound confusing, this onto-epistemological positioning is central to working with Bourdieu and arguably the underlying generative principle of Bourdieusian thinking.

Before moving to discuss some challenges of working with Bourdieusian thinking, I want to articulate, albeit briefly, the notion of Bourdieu as a 'critical' scholar. As an educational administration scholar, irrespective of my preference for rigorous and robust scholarship, an ongoing tension is the matter of criticality in the mobilisation of social theory (Eacott, 2014L&M). In his concluding commentary for the edited collection *Radicalising educational leadership* (Bogotch *et al.*, 2008), Jonathan Jansen (pp. 147-155) argues:

But show me a theoretical framework particularly in the critical tradition that begins to grapple with this imperfect practice. There is none, for what critical theory does is to stand self-righteously at the other end of this struggle and declare the impossible ideals that real practising teachers and principals – the ordinary ones – must but simply cannot attain without working through the ruins of a troubled past, a testing present, and a future from which the lifeblood of hope is drained by the burden of the everyday (p. 155).

For the most part, Bourdieu is identified as a critical sociologist – this is very much based on most education researchers coming to him via *Reproduction*. But I argue that this labelling is a straw man. It plays into the rhetoric of rigorous scholarship as exotic and the caricature of the theory and practice divide. More importantly, it demonstrates a particular reading of Bourdieu, one which I argue is focused on specificity and missing the larger argument. It is based on an application of Bourdieusian thinking tools, that which leaves the existing theorisation intact. Jansen's critique of the critical in educational administration is legitimate. The utopia of equality and equity are far

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removed from the lived experience of the contemporary capitalist condition. But before labelling, forever more, Bourdieu as a critical sociologist, I feel that this mistakenly misrepresents his research program. What I contend Bourdieu achieves across this oeuvre, is the notion that we cannot change the world without creating new ways of seeing and knowing the world. Over his body of work, this is embodied in his methodological approach to scholarship. Assuming that Bourdieusian thinking is a vocabulary for labelling practices is to miss the epistemologically charged nature of his work. In doing so, while acknowledging the messiness that is the social, this also problematizes the scholarly exercise.

### **Enduring struggles**

Working with Bourdieusian thinking creates a series of enduring struggles. As someone who would openly admit to still finding my way through these struggles, it seems somewhat premature (but when would it not be) to claim any victory. Therefore, what I am going to offer here is some insights into the enduring struggles to which I engage. Building directly from my above mentioned grounding, the most substantive struggle I continue to encounter is epistemological vigilance. This is specifically as my identity is at stake in my own work. As with just about all educational administration faculty, I am a former school administrator (and a cursory glance at recruitment advertisements will demonstrate the privileging of such). Additionally, I hold, or have held, a number of administrative roles in the academy. This blurs the boundaries between the native perception of the spontaneous sociologist and the research object constructed through 'scientific' method. Therefore, the *doxic* modality through which the social world is perceived is the result of the internalisation of the objective structures of the social world in the cognitive schema through which one apprehends the world. Not to mention that there exist a belief, or *illusio*, in administration and, most importantly, the stakes of the task at hand. That is, administration functions only so far as it produces a belief in the value of its product (e.g. policy, security, order) and means of production (e.g. governance).

Seriously engaging with my own ontological complicity led me to recognising the epistemic that is 'leadership' and how much of my work to that point had advanced the *doxa*. In particular, it enabled me to see how the construct of 'leadership' was a methodological artefact. Asking questions of the object from which one comes to focus makes it difficult to propose studies which are recognisable to those trained in the logical empiricist tradition. The absence of operational definitions and the thoughts of research programs as opposed to projects – long-term thinking that is not about 'scaling-up', that canonical managerialist pursuit, but increasing depth and sophistication for the purpose of understanding – are unrecognisable to conservatives. Having a broader view means a shifting focus from the leader, teacher, school to leading, teaching and schooling. It is less about traits and behaviours, as a psychological or particular form of sociological perspective would seek, and more about situated practice. The focus on situated practice, or judgement, is evidenced in the increasingly attention to the work of Luc Boltanski – a former collaborator with Bourdieu. From a situated practice perspective, the research object comes into being through relations with others rather than as separate entities. For me, this has meant a shift from seeking out school leadership to pursuing the organising of education and educational labour. Therefore stream of scholarship on policy, sociology of education, philosophy, history are not competitors encroaching on an intellectual space rather complimentary.

Unlike many research training programs which separate methods, working with Bourdieu blurs the boundaries between theory and method. This sounds simple, but the implications are substantive. It is less about paradigms – such the quantitative and qualitative binary taught in introductory methods courses – and more about most appropriate at the point in time. As with the Savage quote earlier, it is not about causation but rather description. This description is not without explanatory power, but its genesis matters. Causation is the basis for intervention and consistent with a pre-existing normative orientation. Importantly, it also leaves the existing theorisation intact, even if overlaid with a new master narrative. Description provides an avenue to explain, potentially

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in new ways, what is taking place. This approach to scholarship is a cumulative endeavour, a generative project. It is not defined by the problems it solves, but rather the questions it asks. It is not possible to map out a static, and linear, trajectory, as understanding unravels as the scholastic endeavour continues.

Thinking programmatically, instead of project to project, means the scholastic enterprise embodies and is embedded, in the social world as much as any research object. The generative nature of the research program creates a new temporality for research. Unlike a focus on projects, those based in clock time, and linear rationality, thinking with Bourdieu privileges event time, a trajectory that historicises scholarship – the present questions, methods, samples and the like – where choices are the enactment of the position of the researcher within a research tradition and intellectual journey. This journey is neither individual nor collective. It is not about building on where others have been, but delving deeper with more sophisticated methods and understandings. It is also about locating the work in place.

What I have outlined may seem vague or fuzzy on details. Despite this being somewhat frustrating for the reader, it is deliberate. If we are to take epistemological vigilance serious, then it is very difficult, if not impossible, to articulate design and methods in advance. This is counter to conservative training in research, but it does bring knowledge production into alignment with the dynamics of the social world. Comfort with this onto-epistemological stance does not come easy. If anything, it requires unlearning much of the research training we have been exposed to, and definitely requires breaking with the spontaneous understanding of research advanced through everyday language. In short, working with Bourdieu requires a willingness to not accept the world, or the scholastic endeavour, at face value and ask questions of everything.

### **An ongoing program**

With an intellectual heritage very much grounded in my engagement with Bourdieusian thinking, but also calling upon critical management studies, and understandably educational administration scholarship, I am currently advancing a *relational* research program in educational leadership, management and administration (see: Eacott, 2015). In particular, I am seeking to bring Bourdieu into direct conversation, ad debate, with contemporary issues in the organising of education and educational labour. With a theoretical and empirical focus, the *relational* approach investigates how the production of knowledge of the legitimacy, effectiveness, efficiency, and morality of organising connects with the practices of organising. In doing so, questions are raised regarding the extent to which existing ways of thinking are generative or limiting of alternate ways of being. A *relational* focus enables scholarship to move beyond internal tensions and external pressures by opening up institutions, those which constantly redefine their very existence. As a means of articulating the defining features of this *relational* approach to scholarship, below I list five key features:

- The centrality of ‘organising’ in the social world creates an ontological complicity in researchers that makes it difficult to epistemologically break from our spontaneous understanding of the social world;
- Rigorous social ‘scientific’ scholarship would therefore call into question the very foundations on which the contemporarily popular discourses of ‘leadership’, ‘management’ and ‘administration’ in education are constructed;
- The contemporary social condition cannot be separated from the ongoing, and inexhaustible, recasting of organising labour;
- Studying educational administration ‘relationally’ enables the overcoming of the contemporary, and arguably enduring, tensions of individualism and collectivism, and structure and agency; and
- In doing so, there is a productive – rather than merely critical – space to theorise educational administration.

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The *relational* perspective focuses on situated – temporally and socio-spatially – actions. This represents a significant shift from content specific issues (e.g. strategic planning, improving outcomes), as such content are not ‘facts’ of an objective reality but epistemic constructs, to social practices. The move to a focus on situated practice is not consistent with traditional theory-building approaches and requires new standards for validity, reliability and trustworthiness that are often uncomfortable within entity-based perspectives. Stability and certainty are not the goal nor conceivable. Conservative notions of validity are challenged when the idea of an independent scientific observer is rejected and the lines between subject and object blurred. Generalisability, a quintessential of scientific value, is de-emphasised in a temporally and socio-spatially grounded description. Not to mention that such scholarly practice may be difficult to operationalise. It is messy, dynamic and situated in time and space. But if the social world to which we inquire is similar, should we expect any different?

### Thinking anew

Will Atkinson (2012) argues that the incredible breadth of Bourdieu’s influence on global sociology is not contested, yet the precise character and utility of it certainly is. What you will notice throughout this chapter is a distinct lack of attention to the big three thinking tools of Bourdieu. Here lays a key distinction, and the core of my research program, the greatest potential in thinking with a great thinker (e.g. Bourdieu, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and so on) is not the direct application of their work, but the revitalising of it for a different time and space. While I have no problems with those mobilising Bourdieusian thinking tools in their scholarship, I contend that the greatest potency of social theory is arguably its generative nature.

As social theorists we pursue research objects that are always in motion. Ways of knowing, being and doing are not static. Numerous technological advances have made various aspects of field and desk research more efficient. Powerful processors have enabled large amounts of data to be analysed with the clicks of buttons. The expansion of research training has led to a proliferation of textbooks on ‘how to’ do Bourdieu (or any theorist) and countless chapters and articles outline how to mobilise particular thinking tools. What gets lost in much of this corpus is that the social world is messy. Why should we expect scholarship of it to be any different? Across my career thus far – and I have no intention of this changing – is that the most frustrating part is also the most rewarding. Getting one’s hand dirty by engaging with the construction of the research object and challenging our own ontological complicity with the world as it is, is intellectually challenging, time consuming yet illuminating.

The intellectual project is an ongoing one. Any particular project is neither the beginning nor end of a line of inquiry. At risk of getting too normative, social theory should arguably seek to offer theoretical interventions that enable one to see the research object and/or process in new ways. Ways which are not limited to any one specific socio-geographic location, but rather theoretically charged. Theory travels far better across boundaries, both geographic and cultural, than empirical research. Offering scholarship that questions the status quo of knowledge production and practice, sketches areas of possible relevance and possible theoretical development that serve to extend current debates in fruitful directions. What quickly becomes clear though is that such scholarship is invitational. It warrants a generative reading, one that goes beyond the words on a page, but if done well, it requires a response. Therefore, as I always do, I encourage the reader to think with, beyond, and where necessary, against what I have argued in the spirit of the intellectual enterprise.

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