

**RESEARCHING SOCIAL INEQUALITIES IN EDUCATION:  
TOWARDS A BOURDIEUIAN METHODOLOGY**

Carmen Mills & Trevor Gale

The University of Southern Queensland & Monash University

*International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*

Mills, Carmen and Gale, Trevor (2007) *Researching social inequalities in education: Towards a Bourdieuian methodology*. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 20 (4). pp. 433-447.

This is the authors' final corrected manuscript. Accessed from USQ ePrints <http://eprints.usq.edu.au>

**Correspondence:**

Dr Carmen Mills  
Faculty of Education  
The University of Southern Queensland  
PO Box 4196  
Springfield, Queensland, 4300 AUSTRALIA  
Email: [millscar@usq.edu.au](mailto:millscar@usq.edu.au)

**ABSTRACT**

The injustices of “allowing certain people to succeed, based not upon merit but upon the cultural experiences, the social ties and the economic resources they have access to, often remains unacknowledged in the broader society” (Wacquant, 1998, p. 216). Cognizant of this, we argue that education requires researchers’ renewed examination and explanation of its involvement in the construction of social and economic differences. Specifically, we make the case for researchers to consider the theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu, outlining what we understand by a Bourdieuan methodology, which is informed by socially critical and post-structural understandings of the world. Such methodology attempts to dig beneath surface appearances, asking how social systems work. By asking “whose interests are being served and how” (Tripp, 1998, p. 37) in the social arrangements we find, Bourdieu can help us to “work towards a more just social order” (Lenzo, 1995, p. 17).

## **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

Carmen Mills is a Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at The University of Southern Queensland, Australia. Her research interests are informed broadly by the sociology of education and specifically by issues of social justice in education, schooling in disadvantaged communities and teacher education. Correspondence to Dr Carmen Mills, Faculty of Education, The University of Southern Queensland, P.O. Box 4196, Springfield, Queensland, 4300, AUSTRALIA. Email: [millsca@usq.edu.au](mailto:millsca@usq.edu.au)

Trevor Gale is Associate Professor of Education at Monash University, Australia. His research interests are in policy sociology and social justice in education, particularly in contexts of schooling and higher education. He is author of three books: *Just Schooling* (2000), *Engaging Teachers* (2003) and *Rough Justice* (2005) and editor of *Critical Studies in Education*. Correspondence to A/Professor Trevor Gale, Faculty of Education, Monash University, PO Box 527 Frankston, Victoria, 3199, AUSTRALIA. Email: [Trevor.Gale@education.monash.edu.au](mailto:Trevor.Gale@education.monash.edu.au)

## INTRODUCTION

Education is often perceived to be the great equalizer in an otherwise unjust society. Since the introduction of mass schooling in the mid-nineteenth century, many Australians have looked to public education as a basic right and a vehicle that will furnish them with the rewards and opportunities to experience more fulfilling and satisfying lives (Gale, 2006). Yet, as Thomson (2001) points out, there has never been a free and democratic public education system. Because access to education has always been at a cost to parents, schools have always favored the rich and powerful (Connell, 1993). Indeed, there is a long history of schools having a tendency to “connect best with, and work best for, students of middle-class, Anglo, male backgrounds” (Ladwig & Gore, 1998, p. 19).

Mindful of the current environment in which differential student outcomes are attributed simply to (teachers’ and/or students’) hard work or the lack of it, we argue that education requires researchers’ renewed examination and explanation of its involvement in the construction of social and economic differences. Specifically, we make the case for researchers to draw on the theoretical work of Bourdieu—which is informed by socially critical and post-structural understandings of the world—and use research for “working towards justice, fairness and equity in education” (Griffiths, 1998, p. 3). Indeed, we wish to foreground “starting the process of educational research with a set of values that guide decisions about *what* is researched, and *how* and *why*” (Griffiths, 1998, p. 3, emphasis original). In doing this, we explore two questions: First, what is the focus of and justification for Bourdieuan research, which makes Bourdieu’s work particularly valuable for this kind of research agenda? And second, how do Bourdieuan researchers produce knowledge?

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

We begin, then, with an account of Bourdieu’s socially critical disposition for research, particularly with respect to how this plays out in the context of schooling and society more broadly, and affirming the value of his work in guiding researchers in their examination and explanation of social inequalities in education.

## A BOURDIEUAN FOCUS: TAKING A CRITICAL STANDPOINT ON SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

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

Informed by his research exposing the fallacy of individuals familiar with bourgeois culture possessing any more innate intelligence or “giftedness” than those who are unfamiliar with it (see, for example, Bourdieu, 1974; Bourdieu & de Saint Martin, 1974), Bourdieu argues against what he sees as a meritocratic illusion. In such work, he argues that it is the culture of the dominant group—that is, the group that controls the economic, social, and political resources—which is embodied within schools. In other words, educational institutions ensure the profitability of the cultural capital of the dominant, attesting to their gifts and merits. Educational differences are thus frequently “misrecognized” as the result of “individual giftedness” rather than class based differences, ignoring the fact that the abilities measured by scholastic criteria often stem not from natural “gifts” but from “the greater or lesser

affinity between class cultural habits and the demands of the educational system or the criteria which define success within it" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, p. 22).

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

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

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

It is this existence of a world characterized by socio-economic and cultural inequalities that motivates socially critical research. It is an approach to research that attempts to dig beneath surface appearances, asking how social systems work, and how ideology or history conceals the processes that oppress and control people, in order to reveal the nature of oppressive mechanisms (Harvey, 1990). In this way, by asking "whose interests are being served and how" (Tripp, 1998, p. 37) in the social arrangements we find, socially critical researchers hope to "work towards a more just social order" (Lenzo, 1995, p. 17) in which the subordinated may become "empowered to take control of their lives and change the conditions which have caused their oppression" (Beder, 1991, p. 4). Implied here is that critical researchers are committed not just to knowing, but to transforming; to changing the world, to combating discrimination and oppression (Figueroa, 2000). In this they seek to "go beyond ... describing 'what is going on' and explaining 'why' ... For them, unmasking oppressive structures and contributing to social and political change ... is ... integral to ... research" (Troyna, 1995, p. 398).

It is on these grounds in particular that we claim Bourdieu as a socially critical theorist, although some might question his commitment to imagining how things in society and education might be different. At least regarding the first of critical theory's interests, Bourdieu harbors a concern that schooling reproduces society and provides explanation of how this system of reproduction of advantage and disadvantage in education works. Yet, like many socially critical theorists, Bourdieu has been criticized for his emphasis on reproduction at the expense of possible action to create a new and different world. According to his critics, Bourdieu's theory seems to leave no room for notions like resistance (Grenfell & James, 1998a). However, in our view, his work is widely misunderstood.

Take his concept of habitus, for example. Habitus, as Bourdieu uses the term, characterizes the recurring patterns of class outlook--the beliefs, values, conduct, speech, dress and manners--which are inculcated by everyday experiences within the family, the peer group and the school. Implying habit, or unthinking-ness in actions, the habitus operates below the level of calculation and consciousness, underlying and conditioning and orienting practices by providing individuals with a sense of how to act and respond in the course of their daily lives "without consciously obeying rules explicitly posed as such" (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 76). That is, the habitus disposes actors to do certain things, orienting their actions and inclinations, without strictly determining them.

Within the Bourdieuan literature, habitus is both “generative (of perceptions and practice) and structuring (that is, defining limits upon what is conceivable as perception and practice)” (Codd, 1990, p. 139). Bourdieu’s attempt to “undermine the dualisms of objectivism and subjectivism, structure and agent, determinism and phenomenology” is a central element of his work (Kenway & McLeod, 2004, p. 528). This creative yet limited capacity for improvisation reveals both the dynamic structure of social reality and the constraint of social conditions where many of us believe there to be choice and free will (Bourdieu, 1990a). The notion enables Bourdieu to analyze the behavior of agents as “objectively coordinated and regular without being the product of rules, on the one hand, or conscious rationality, on the other” (Postone, LiPuma & Calhoun, 1993, p. 4). In this sense, habitus transcends “determinism and freedom, conditioning and creativity, consciousness and the unconscious, or the individual and society” (Bourdieu, 1990b, pp. 54--55).

However, as Kenway and McLeod (2004, p. 528) point out, “there remains much contestation over the extent to which this is ultimately an account of social determination and reproduction, where the habitus is reducible to the effects of the field, or whether there is space for the improvisation of agents.” Jenkins (2002, p. 21), among others, argues that despite Bourdieu’s best efforts to “transcend the dualistic divide between ‘objectivism’ and ‘subjectivism’ ... [he] remains caught in an unresolved contradiction between determinism and voluntarism, with the balance of his argument favouring the former.” Although concerned to give to practice an active, inventive intention by insisting on the generative capacities of dispositions (Bourdieu, 1990a), some suggest that Bourdieu does not give nearly enough credit to agency and the revolutionary potential of agents. In their view, his world is far more reproductive than transformative; his social universe “ultimately remains one in which things happen to people, rather than a world in which they can intervene in their individual and collective destinies” (Jenkins, 2002, p. 91). For example, Nash (1990, p. 445) maintains that Bourdieu’s theory of practice “negates the theory of action, blurs the concept of choice, and introduces confusion, circularity and pseudo--determinism.” Similarly, Jenkins (2002, p. 90) argues that despite Bourdieu’s “acknowledgement of, and enthusiasm for, resistance, it is difficult to find examples in his work of its efficacy or importance.”

While we agree with Jenkins that Bourdieu’s conception of agency is somewhat restrained, we tend to regard this as a strength, reflecting its relationship with an equally restrained conception of structure. In short, “there is no such thing as pure agency; but a kind of (limited) agency can be identified ... [S]ubjects are able to negotiate the rules, regulations, influences and imperatives that inform all cultural practice, and delimit thought and action, precisely because fields dispose them to do so” (Schirato & Webb, 2003, p. 540). Agency, then, is inextricably bound up with the world (Schirato & Webb, 2003). That is:

Bourdieu specifically rejects the idea of a knowing, transcendental consciousness ... somehow able to free itself from its history, social trajectories, and circumstances of thought. All activity and knowledge ... is always informed by a relationship between where the agent has been and how their history has been incorporated, on the one hand, and their context or circumstances (both in a general sense and ‘of the moment’), on the other. In other words, agency is always the result of a coming together of the habitus and the specific cultural fields and contexts in which agents ‘find themselves’, in both senses of the expression. (Schirato & Webb, 2003, p. 541)

Bourdieu (1993, p. 87, emphasis original) puts it best when he says that:

the *habitus* is a product of conditionings which tends to reproduce the objective logic of those conditionings while transforming it. It’s a kind of transforming machine that leads us to ‘reproduce’ the social conditions of our own production, but in a relatively unpredictable way, in such a way that one cannot move simply and mechanically from knowledge of the conditions of production to knowledge of the products.

In a similar way, we argue that the same conceptual framework that he uses to explore reproduction can also be employed to explain situations of rupture and transformation (Wacquant, 1998). Indeed, an emphasis on reproduction does not foreclose contrary action such as revolutionary struggle (Calhoun, 1993). For Bourdieu, the social universe is the site of endless and pitiless competition. It is struggle, not “reproduction”, that is the master metaphor at the core of his thought (Wacquant, 1998).

From their earliest beginnings, then, Bourdieu’s analyses of social practices were intended to elucidate the workings of social power and offer a *critical*, not simply a neutral, understanding of social

life (Postone et al., 1993). What is problematic for Bourdieu is the fact that the established order is *not* seen as problematic (Bourdieu, 1998). For Bourdieu, this is because justifications for the prevailing social order are masked by “theoretical theory” (Bourdieu, 1977) that offers explanations of social life removed from a rigorous engagement with social practices. It is for these reasons that we see a Bourdieuan methodology as having the potential to make a valuable contribution in researching social inequalities in education: (i) because it is an approach to research centrally concerned with the dialectic between the theoretical and the empirical, important for theorizing “what is really going on”, and also (ii) because such methodology has the potential to “denaturalise and to defatalize the social world ... to destroy the myths that cloak the exercise of power and the perpetuation of domination” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 49--50). Having outlined the focus of and justification for Bourdieuan research, we move now to a discussion around how Bourdieuan researchers produce knowledge about social inequalities.

### **A BOURDIEUAN METHOD: PRODUCING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT SOCIAL INEQUALITIES**

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

It is this synthesis of object and subject that first characterizes Bourdieu’s methodology, which also explains his comfortableness with qualitative and quantitative data, for example. A second characteristic is his insistence on participant objectivation, given that all research is motivated by intrinsic interests of some kind. From Bourdieu’s perspective, researchers need to recognize these personal biases---their values, experiences and constructions---and acknowledge that these, as well as the historical, ideological moment in which they live, will influence the direction of their research. These theoretical and political characteristics of Bourdieu’s methodology are taken up more fully below, first in relation to the theory that informs this methodology and second with regard to its (political) practice.

#### **Bourdieuian methodology in theory**

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

According to Bourdieu, although the two moments of analysis are equally necessary, they are not equal: “epistemological priority is granted to objectivist rupture over subjectivist understanding” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 10--11). Bourdieuans see the need to problematize what people say as something other than either simply a reflection of “what is going on in their heads” or a valid description of the social world (Jenkins, 2002). Questions are raised about the degree to which the testimony of research subjects is reliable and about the limits within which they can reflect adequately upon their own practice (Jenkins, 2002).

At the same time, the post--structuralist understanding “that all groups have a right to speak for themselves, in their own voice, and have that voice accepted as authentic and legitimate” (Harvey, 1989, p. 48), is central to Bourdieuan research. Epistemological standpoints previously undervalued make up an important focus of such research, creating spaces for marginalized voices to speak their own knowledges. Post--structuralism’s close attention to “other worlds” and to “other voices” that have for too long been silenced (Harvey, 1989) lead many to claim that “it is only from these standpoints that legitimate knowledge concerning them can be generated and, in some cases, known” (Gale, 1997, p. 104). Indeed, as Sandra Harding (1998, p. 17) notes:

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

Bourdieu seeks to overcome this opposition between "theoretical knowledge of the social world as constructed by outside observers and the knowledge used by those who possess a practical mastery of their world" (Postone et al., 1993, p. 3) by attempting to accord validity to "native" conceptions without simply taking those conceptions at face value. He speaks of the artificiality both of the vision that he sometimes had by observing things from a strictly objectivist point of view and of "the vision that informants proposed [to him] when, in their concern to play the game, to be equal to the situation created by the theoretical questioning, they turned themselves as it were into the spontaneous theoreticians of their practice" (Bourdieu, 1990a, pp. 21--22).

Utilizing Bourdieu's theoretical perspective to inform data analysis, then, requires researchers to look at the dynamic interaction between individuals and the surroundings in which they find themselves and situate their accounts within a larger historical, political, economic and symbolic context. Bourdieu (in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 104--107) gives a very explicit account of what it means to analyze a field by thinking in terms of three distinct levels that direct the researcher to:

1. Analyze the position of the field *vis-à-vis* the field of power;
2. Map out the objective structure of relations between the positions occupied by agents who compete for the legitimate forms of specific authority of which the field is the site; and
3. Analyze the habitus of agents; the systems of dispositions they have acquired by internalizing a determinate type of social and economic condition.

Grenfell and James (1998c) claim that we can think similarly about education: as systems of power hierarchies organized within society with consequent effects on individuals who both are produced by and reproduce them. At the first level (level 1), there is the relationship between "education and the political and economic systems of society. This relationship is crucial in terms of what is expected of education; how it is organized and to what ends---in other words, what is valued and legitimate" (Grenfell & James, 1998c, p. 169). Further:

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

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

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

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

### **Bourdieuian methodology in practice**

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



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

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

Bourdieu believes that three types of biases may blur the sociological gaze (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The first is the social origins and coordinates, the position and trajectory in the social space of the individual researcher (for example, gender, class, nationality, ethnicity, education, etc.). In fact, one of Bourdieu’s students, Charles Souliè, has shown that research topics in philosophy and sociology are statistically related to social origin and trajectory, gender and educational trajectory. This means that:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The third and most insidious source of bias is what Bourdieu refers to as an “intellectual bias”---that is, “a tendency for subjects from certain fields (academe for one) to abstract practices from their contexts, and see them as ideas to be contemplated rather than problems to be addressed or solved” (Schirato & Webb, 2003, p. 545). This intellectualist bias, which entices us to construe the world as a spectacle:

as a set of significations to be interpreted rather than as concrete problems to be solved practically, is more profound and more distorting than those rooted in the social origins or location of the analyst in the academic field, because it can lead us to miss entirely the *differentia specifica* of the logic of practice (Bourdieu 1990b, 1990c). (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 39--40, emphasis original)

When faced with the challenge of studying a world to which we are linked, often our first thought is to deny our own involvement. According to Bourdieu (1988, p. 6), this “concern to escape any suspicion of prejudice leads us to attempt to negate ourselves as ‘biased’ or ‘informed’ subjects automatically suspected of using weapons of science in the pursuit of personal interests.” In Bourdieu’s (2000) view, nothing is more false than this universally accepted maxim that the researcher must put nothing of her/himself into her/his research. On the contrary, Bourdieu believes that a researcher should constantly refer to her/his experiences, although not in a guilty, unconscious or uncontrolled way.

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

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

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

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

It is important, then, for critical sociologists to cast a professional eye on the world of their origin, to understand and deconstruct their own position in both the research and the academic field. In doing so, research becomes a process of self--analysis in which researchers attempt to grasp at a conscious level their own dispositions in order to make sense of those they conduct their research with/on. As Kenway and McLeod (2004) point out, this kind of reflexivity looks very much like innovations within feminist and post--structuralist scholarship. Indeed:

while many accounts do no more than notice (and often self--indulgently---vanity reflexivity) the autobiography of the researcher, in other research texts methodological reflexivity is deployed in a stronger form, acknowledging the partiality of perspective and the effects of different (structural and spatial) locations and power relations between researcher and researched. Such claiming of reflexivity, in contrast to the simply individualizing autobiographical acknowledgments, connects more closely with the project of reflexive sociology as described by Bourdieu. (Kenway & McLeod, 2004, p. 527)

Kenway and McLeod (2004) claim that a consciousness of our own positions and dispositions within the field is something that feminist sociologists of education seek to keep to the fore. “This includes the effect of our presence on the perspectives we are offered by the various participants, and our own

attachment to and construction of particular perspectives and truths” (Kenway & McLeod, 2004, p. 541).

The work of Bourdieu also encourages the researcher to avoid the symbolic violence of imposing an interpretation on reality (Grenfell & James, 1998b). In other forms of research, theorizing is something that is “the sole prerogative of qualified outsiders, once compliant ‘subjects’ have been conveniently milked” (Smyth & Hattam, 2001, p. 408). As the researcher selects, interprets and represents the data, the intended meanings of participants inevitably become distorted and reshaped (Burke, 2002). Checking interpretations and emerging constructions with respondents, then, is an important part of the conclusion drawing and verification process for a Bourdieuan researcher. The necessity of this reflects a realization by researchers that their interpretation is partial and limited (Walker, 1983) and, thus, they must attempt to come to understand how all those who are involved interpret behavior in addition to the way they interpret it from their own perspective (Wilson, 1977). Reality is contested. Bourdieuan researchers, as socially critical researchers, are “aware from the outset” that their task is a political one involving “not simply telling the truth of this world ... but also showing that this world is the site of an ongoing struggle to tell the truth of this world” (Bourdieu in Wacquant, 1989, p. 35).

## **CONCLUSION**

According to Wacquant (2002, pp. 1--2), Bourdieu's theory and politics are “less a collection of fixed propositions and scholastic precepts than a ‘toolkit’ forged by and for research, aimed at posing scientifically those fruitful questions which, by tearing the veil of taken--for--grantedness, enable us to see the social world, and ourselves, with new eyes.” Sociologists such as Bourdieu force us to make conscious those things that we might prefer to leave unconscious, even though some may have a certain resistance to such analysis. By bringing to light the arbitrary and the contingent where we like to see necessity or nature, and social constraints where we like to see choice and free will, critical sociologists, “like all prophets of evil tidings” (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 15), have often been condemned for their revelations. Nevertheless, Bourdieu et al. (1999, p. 629) suggest that “what the social world has done, it can, armed with this knowledge, undo.” For example, increasing awareness of the mechanisms at work in the reproduction of disadvantage in education may help by offering a measure of freedom to those manipulated by these mechanisms (Bourdieu, 1998a) and improve access, participation and educational outcomes for marginalized and disenfranchised groups. Indeed:

If it is true that it is not easy to eliminate or even modify most of the economic and social factors behind the worst suffering, particularly the mechanisms regulating the labor and educational markets, it is also true that any political program that fails to take full advantage of the possibilities for action (minimal though they may be) that science can help uncover, can be considered guilty of nonassistance to a person in danger. (Bourdieu et al., 1999, p. 629)

However, we should not imagine that a Bourdieuan methodology is eclectic, that “anything goes” in unmasking social and educational inequalities. As we have argued, a focus on inequalities is a defining characteristic of Bourdieuan research but so too is a critical regard for research practices themselves. Research that lacks this reflexivity is questionable both in relation to its outcomes and also its ethics. This is not to say though that because of its reflexivity Bourdieuan methodology is beyond such questioning. All research is partial, as we have acknowledged. However, what is appealing about Bourdieu's approach is its recognition of this and its interest in inviting others to engage with this partiality.

In many ways, these two concerns---revealing how research is conceived and the purposes of its conception---are “two translations of the same sentence” (Spinoza in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 105): the interdependence of theory and practice in the research endeavour. We believe that a Bourdieuan methodology---with its interests in uncovering and transforming social inequalities, its theoretical dialecticism and radical democratic politics---has the potential to see possibilities for socially just action in education realized.

## REFERENCES

- Barnard, H. (1990) Bourdieu and ethnography: Reflexivity, politics and praxis, in R. Harker & C. Mahar & C. Wilkes (Eds.) *An introduction to the work of Pierre Bourdieu: The practice of theory* (London, Macmillan), 58--85.
- Beder, H. (1991) *Mapping the terrain*, paper presented at the Convergence XXIV, 3, ICAE, Ontario.
- Bourdieu, P. (1974) The school as a conservative force: Scholastic and cultural inequalities, in J. Eggleston (Ed.) *Contemporary research in the sociology of education* (London, Methuen), 32--46.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977) *Outline of a theory of practice* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste* (London, Routledge).
- Bourdieu, P. (1988) *Homo academicus* (Stanford, Stanford University Press).
- Bourdieu, P. (1990a) *In other words: Essays towards a reflexive sociology* (Stanford, Stanford University Press).
- Bourdieu, P. (1990b) *The logic of practice* (Stanford, Stanford University Press).
- Bourdieu, P. (1990c) The scholastic point of view, *Cultural anthropology*, 5(4), 380--391.
- Bourdieu, P. (1993) *Sociology in question* (London, Sage).
- Bourdieu, P. (1997) The forms of capital, in A. Halsey & H. Lauder & P. Brown & A. S. Wells (Eds.) *Education: Culture, economy and society* (Oxford, Oxford University Press), 46--58.
- Bourdieu, P. (1998) *Practical reason: On the theory of action* (Cambridge, Polity).
- Bourdieu, P. (2000) *Participant objectivation: Breaching the boundary between anthropology and sociology---how?* (*Huxley Memorial Lecture 2000*), paper presented at the The Royal Anthropological Institute, London, University College.
- Bourdieu, P., Accardo, A., Balazs, G., Beaud, S., Bonvin, F., Bourdieu, E., et al. (1999) *The weight of the world: Social suffering in contemporary society* (Cambridge, Polity).
- Bourdieu, P. & de Saint Martin, M. (1974) Scholastic excellence and the values of the educational System, in J. Eggleston (Ed.) *Contemporary research in the sociology of education* (London, Methuen), 338--371.
- Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J.--C. (1979) *The inheritors: French students and their relation to culture* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press).
- Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J.--C. (1990) *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (2nd ed.), (London, Sage).
- Bourdieu, P. & Wacquant, L. (1992) *An invitation to reflexive sociology* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press).
- Bourdieu, P. & Wacquant, L. (1989) Towards a reflexive sociology: A workshop with Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociological Theory*, 7, 26--63.
- Burke, P. J. (2002) Towards a collaborative methodology: An ethnography of widening educational Participation, *Australian Educational Researcher*, 29(1), 115--136.
- Calhoun, C. (1993) Habitus, field, and capital: The question of historical specificity, in C. Calhoun & E. LiPuma & M. Postone (Eds.) *Bourdieu: Critical perspectives* (Cambridge, Polity), 61--88.
- Codd, J. (1990) Making distinctions: The eye of the beholder, in R. Harker & C. Mahar & C. Wilkes (Eds.) *An introduction to the work of Pierre Bourdieu: The practice of theory* (London, Macmillan), 132--159.
- Connell, R. W. (1993) *Schools and social justice* (Leichhardt, Pluto).
- Figueroa, P. (2000) Researching education and racialization: Virtue or validity?, in H. Simons & R. Usher (Eds.) *Situated ethics in educational research* (London, Routledge), 82--100.
- Gale, T. (1997) *Policy production and the Australian state: Higher education entry in Queensland, March 1987---March 1996*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia.
- Gale, T. (2006) How did we ever arrive at the conclusion that teachers are the problem? A critical reading in the discourses of Australian schooling, in B. Doecke, M. Howie & W. Sawyer (Eds.) *'Only connect ...': English teaching, schooling, and democracy* (Kent Town, AATE & Wakefield Press).
- Grenfell, M. & James, D. (1998a) Theory, practice and pedagogic research, in M. Grenfell & D. James (Eds.) *Bourdieu and education: Acts of practical theory* (London, Falmer Press), 6--26.
- Grenfell, M. & James, D. (1998b) The practice of theory, in M. Grenfell & D. James (Eds.) *Bourdieu and education: Acts of practical theory* (London, Falmer Press), 122--149.
- Grenfell, M. & James, D. (1998c) Theory as method, in M. Grenfell & D. James (Eds.) *Bourdieu and education: Acts of practical theory* (London: Falmer Press), 152--178.
- Griffiths, M. (1998) *Educational research for social justice: Getting off the fence* (Buckingham, Open University Press).
- Guba, E. G. & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989) *Fourth generation evaluation* (Newbury Park, Sage).
- Harding, S. (1998) *Is science multicultural?: Postcolonialisms, feminisms and epistemologies* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press).

- Harvey, D. (1989) *The condition of postmodernity: An enquiry into the origins of cultural change* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell).
- Harvey, L. (1990) *Critical social research* (London, Unwin Hyman).
- Henry, M., Knight, J., Lingard, R., & Taylor, S. (1988) *Understanding schooling: An introductory sociology of Australian education* (London, Routledge).
- Jenkins, R. (2002) *Pierre Bourdieu* (London, Routledge).
- Kenway, J., & McLeod, J. (2004) Bourdieu's reflexive sociology and "spaces of points of view": Whose reflexivity, which perspective? *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 25(4), 525--544.
- Ladwig, J. & Gore, J. (1998) Nurturing democracy in schools, in J. Smyth & R. Hattam & M. Lawson (Eds.) *Schooling for a fair go* (Leichhardt, Federation Press), 15--26.
- Lenzo, K. (1995) Validity and self-reflexivity meet post-structuralism: Scientific ethos and the transgressive self, *Educational Researcher*, 52(1), 17--23.
- Nash, R. (1990) Bourdieu on education and social and cultural reproduction, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 11(4), 431--447.
- Pollitt, K. (2002, Feb 18) Pierre Bourdieu, 1930--2002, *The Nation*, 274, 10.
- Postone, M., LiPuma, E., & Calhoun, C. (1993) Introduction: Bourdieu and social theory, in C. Calhoun & E. LiPuma & M. Postone (Eds.) *Bourdieu: Critical perspectives* (Cambridge, Polity), 1--13.
- Schirato, T., & Webb, J. (2003) Bourdieu's concept of reflexivity as metaliteracy, *Cultural studies*, 17(3/4), 539--552.
- Smyth, J. & Hattam, R. (2001) "Voiced" research as a sociology for understanding "dropping out" of School, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 22(3), 401--415.
- Thomson, P. (2001) The sound of one hand grasping at straws? Struggles for quality and equity in public school education, in P. Nursery--Bray & C. Lee--Bacchi (Eds.) *Left directions: Is there a third way?* (Perth, University of Western Australia Press), 178--192.
- Tripp, D. (1998) Critical incidents in action inquiry, in G. Shacklock & J. Smyth (Eds.) *Being reflexive in critical educational and social research* (London, Falmer Press), 36--49.
- Troyna, B. (1995) Beyond reasonable doubt? Researching "race" in educational settings, *Oxford Review of Education*, 21(4), 395--408.
- Wacquant, L. J. D. (1993) Bourdieu in America: Notes on the transatlantic importation of social theory, in C. Calhoun & E. LiPuma & M. Postone (Eds.) *Bourdieu: Critical perspectives* (Cambridge, Polity), 235--262.
- Wacquant, L. J. D. (1998) Pierre Bourdieu, in R. Stones (Ed.) *Key sociological thinkers* (New York, New York University Press), 215--229.
- Wacquant, L. J. D. (2002) An inventive and iconoclastic scientist, *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, 47.
- Walker, R. (1983) Three good reasons for not doing case studies in curriculum research, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 15(2), 155--165.
- Wilson, S. (1977) The use of ethnographic techniques in educational research, *Review of Educational Research*, 47, 245--265.