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Using Bourdieu's Reflexive Sociology to uncover physical education teacher education (PETE) practices

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> Those who like to believe in the miracle of "pure" thought must bring themselves to accept that the love of truth or virtue, like any other kind of disposition, necessarily owes something to the conditions in which it was formed, in other words a social position and trajectory. (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 3)

Keywords

Isomorphic habitus, doxa, illusio, reflexive sociology, and higher education reform

Introduction

In this article I aim to show how Bourdieu's theoretical tools and my adoption of his reflexive sociology helped me to bring my colleagues and my own professional doxic state and non-conscious "isomorphic habitus"[1] (Bourdieu, 2000) to a level of consciousness so that we could better understand our shared experiences and take action during a difficult time of change within our higher education institution. Firstly, I want to foreground the Bourdieuian thesis of how we subconsciously embody and in part create the social structures of our world through our everyday interaction in it, that is, through our history of life experiences.

Bourdieu (1990, 2000) argued that we subconsciously create the social structures of our world through our ongoing daily interactions in it while at the same time the social structures of our world create us as we interact within them. This dialectical relationship is the essence of Bourdieu's theory of practice. He refers to the social structures as *fields* and the embodiment of these structures as *habitus*. Over time a state of synergy or harmony can become established between the social structures and one's embodied disposition towards the *field*, and this can lead to an acceptance of and belief in the field.

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[1] Bourdieu (2000) used the term isomorphic habitus to refer to a collective or group of individuals who shared a similar habitus due to their similar history of involvement in a particular field. In *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984), when speaking of class Bourdieu used the notion of class habitus to refer to those of the same class and at other times he used the term group habitus when referring to collectives who shared a similar habitus.

When such conditions are established a state of *doxa* exists between one's habitus and the field of practice (Bourdieu, 1990, 2000) and this can, in turn, lead to a state of *illusio*. A state of *illusio* is established when the individuals and collectives that make up a field have so much investment and faith in the practices of the field that they are willing to fight for it, that is, take action to retain the established logic of practice in the face of change. Such was the state that was embodied in my colleagues and me, due to our history of involvement in our shared field of physical education teacher education (PETE) in our former college of education. Our state of *illusio* played a significant role in our actions and resistance to change during the period of the early 2000s when Aotearoa New Zealand's remaining colleges of education were being disestablished and their practices integrated into their neighbouring universities.

With the above as my blueprint, I explain how I used Bourdieu's theoretical tools to bring our embodied worldview to a level of reflexive consciousness. Following a brief introduction of my previous research experience, I wish to show why, in this later research, I turned to Bourdieu, and the power of his tools to uncover the taken for granted, so that I could better understand the social dynamics involved in the structuring of my colleagues and my "isomorphic habitus" (Bourdieu, 2000), that is, our collective subconscious embodiment of the college's social structures.

In an earlier research project I examined the subjective positioning of secondary school students through the socialising processes of their physical education classes. At the time I was unfamiliar with Bourdieu's work and employed the theorising of Postman (1995), Wexler (1992) and Giroux (1990, 1997). These theorists provided a theoretical lens that helped me to understand the nature of schooling and its role in the social positioning of students. Wexler (1992) and Postman (1995), for example, argued that public schools provide the institutional structures that enable the social interactions necessary for the process of self-production. Wexler (1992) suggested our schools "are one of the few remaining public interactional spaces in which we are still engaged with each other in the reciprocal, though organizationally patterned, labour of producing meaning—indeed, the core meaning of self-identity" (p. 10). He added that "the primary tracking in school is of the self … anchored in the verifying eyes of friends" (Wexler, 1992, p. 10).

Wexler's social theory demonstrates the important impact that social structures have on the formation of students' personal identity but he also shows that the students themselves are active agents in the process of constructing their narratives, often due to the influence of their verifying friends. As he stated, these "students are not victims but symbolic workers in the identity production process" (Wexler, 1992, p. 7). In as much as he recognises the influential work of both the social structures of institutional schooling and the agency of the individual, Wexler's philosophical positioning resonates with Bourdieu's theory of practice. However, Bourdieu's theory of practice allows us to dig deeper into the genesis and ongoing maintenance of the relationship between individual and society through his recognition of the subconscious processes that can lead to states of doxa and illusio.

Bourdieu's tools of analysis

When we think with Bourdieu, it appears inherently necessary to begin with his primary conceptual framework, i.e. the dialectic between *habitus* and *field*. In short, a *field* is a particular social space filled with social forces and *habitus* is both the subconscious embodiment and determinant of the social forces of the *field*. An individual or group's *habitus* (isomorphic habitus) determines how he, she or they engage in a particular *field* and this engagement establishes, reinforces or challenges and changes the social structures of the *field*, but in turn these social structures determine, reinforce challenge and change the individual's or group's *habitus*, so the relationship is reciprocal, or as Bourdieu states, dialectic. A history of constituting and contesting the social practices of a particular *field* leads to the subconscious embodiment of the field and the accumulation of field specific *cultural capital*, cultural capital being the valued capital of the field in terms of the cultural ways of the field.

The more *field* specific cultural capital one has the more power one has to influence the very nature of the *field*. Through our investment and accumulation of cultural capital in a particular *field* we develop a social identity aligned to a *field*. In this way the social is embodied in the individual as well as being embedded in the social structures of institutions.

As with all social structures, the social forces that determine the field of higher education within our universities (and former colleges of education) are institutionalised and maintained through both formal and informal structures, that is, through legislated hierarchies of power and established institutional structures, as well as the wilful and subconscious actions of the inhabitants. The agency inherent in the latter recognises that institutionalised social structures are not absolute or beyond the possibility of change or solely the outcome of wilful actions but also, importantly, the influence of the subconscious, or as Bourdieu names it, the *habitus*.

Following on from field and habitus, I interpret *doxa* and *illusio* to be secondary concepts that allow a more critical analysis of the social conditions and conditioning of institutional fields. When a sense of normality is established between one's *habitus* and a particular *field* one has a sense of security and belonging to the *field*. This is the condition that Bourdieu called a state of *doxa*. *Doxa*, says Bourdieu (1990), is "the relationship of immediate adherence that is established in practice between a *habitus* and the *field* to which it is attuned" (p. 68). It is a state that gives one a practical sense of not only knowing how to act but also a tacit belief that those actions are most appropriate. It also recognises that these actions are not determined by inflexibly structured rules, recipes or normative models but rather an arbitrary subconscious practical logic of how things are or ought to be done.

Bourdieu takes the *doxic* state a step further with his notion of *illusio*. Fields are real and meaningful for those who share the *doxic* state, and *illusio* is an investment in the logic of the *field* so that its stakes are important and worth pursuing (Bourdieu, 1990). In universities, academics have an investment in the field via their qualifications, research histories and esteemed academic positions, which for many represent the *cultural capital* of higher education.

Taken together, the concepts of *doxa* and *illusio* are particularly powerful because they enable us to recognise the strengths and consequences of the ties we establish when we invest so heavily in the logic of a particular field. But individuals have different levels of power to influence the logic of the field and the individuals who are affected most during a period of change are those who have invested in the *field* and established their social identity with the field.

Bourdieu and social reflexivity

Bourdieu argued that social reflexivity requires the return (reflectere—'to bend back') of the reflexive project upon oneself to examine the conditions that determine a point of view in the first instance (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Although many theories of reflexivity focus on the individual and their interpretation of the social context, few go the step further, as Bourdieu did, to examine the pre-conditioning social within the individual. For example, Alverson and Skoldberg (2000) argue that "reflexivity means interpreting one's own interpretations, looking at one's own perspectives from other perspectives, and turning a self-critical eye onto one's own authority as interpreter and author" (p. vii). But Bourdieu asks us to dig deeper to focus on the subconscious, taken-for-granted embodiment of the social forces within us. Reflexivity should be a process of uncovering the delusions we may have of being self-conceptualising intellectuals, he says. This means uncovering the social within the individual, the impersonal beneath the intimate and the universal buried deep within the most particular (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Social reflexivity requires us to turn the critical gaze on our *habitus*, that is, our embodiment of our social world, to better understand the relationship we have with our identifying fields. When we begin the process of deconstructing the relationship between our *habitus* and social *fields* we begin to see within us the conditioning of our *doxic*

relationship with our field. It also brings the degree of our investment to the surface, allowing us to see the personal consequences of radical change, and asks us to acknowledge that our position-taking is in fact often a defence of our subconscious socialised self.

In this way, Bourdieu's social reflexivity requires us to focus not just on the object of inquiry but our relationship to the object. The object of inquiry in my research was the impact of institutional change on the practices of the PETEs, which resulted from the contrasting and competing practices of the college of education and the university. The relationship to be examined was my colleagues' and my state of doxa and illusio within the college of education due to our many years of service within this institution.

Applying Bourdieu's reflective sociology in practice

The research project that was the object of this investigation monitored the experiences of a group of physical education teacher educators (PETEs) and sought the views of the new Faculty of Education leadership team during the merger. I used Bourdieu's theoretical framework to analyse the findings as I monitored the change process over a period of three and a half years, focusing on the impact on PETE and the teacher educators. Following traditional reporting protocols, the research project involved an examination of current literature and past findings. However, these will not be reported here as space does not permit and the focus of this article is on Bourdieu's social reflexivity (for accounts of associated literature see Smith, 2008, Smith & Tinning, 2011, Smith, in press)

The Government's rationale for merging New Zealand's colleges of education into the universities was based on a belief that a better nexus between the research and scholarship practices of the universities and the more practitioner-focused practices of the colleges of education could produce a more informed teaching profession and better outcomes for New Zealand schoolchildren (Tertiary Education Commission, 2004). However, from the outset it was clear that the merger was going to be anything but a smooth amalgamation of the two different practices. The change process created an environment where two different logics of practice were competing for the same social space (Bourdieu, 1990, 2000), with one, the university, being more dominant than the other and this resulted in extended periods of charged emotions and much contestation.

The participant group of teacher educators and I were former employees of the college of education (henceforth, I will use the inclusive language of 'we' 'our' or 'us' when referring to this group), while the participants from the faculty leadership team were from either the former school of education of the university or the former college of education.

In our former college of education we, the PETE staff, had a collective sense of pride as respected teacher educators within our connected field of physical education. We all had previous records of success as practicing teachers and heads of department, senior school leaders or curriculum developers. Between us we had many years of experience as teacher educators, with five of our number having had over 20 years of experience. We shared a sense of autonomy, authority and power within our established sub-field in the former college of education. This relationship between our sense of self and our feel for our field enabled us to have a feeling of ownership of our PETE programmes and our department. Our field was clearly more than just a physical and academic space as it provided a shared sense of professional identity and self-worth for all of us. We had established a state of *doxa* with our *field* of practice. Moreover, we had career-defining investments in our field, so much so that any threat to our field during the transition was also a threat to our professional identity. This reflected our state of *illusio*.

However, during the merger it was proposed that the foundational PETE programme, our Bachelor of Physical Education, should be moved into the Faculty of Science's Department of Sport and Exercise Science, to merge with their existing BSc (Exercise and Sport Science) programme, where the valued

scientific research was being undertaken. It was assumed that the PETE teaching staff should also move and benefit from this merging of practices. This established for us the conditions to contest our social space, with our aim being to justify our current logic of practice, framed as it was within the broader field of education and retain our place within the Faculty of Education.

Our state of illusio, that is, our attachment with and investment in our established field, was exemplified by an interview statement from one of my colleagues during the pre-merger interview (there are many others but I have chosen just this one to represent our sense of ownership and faith in our current practice). He states:

> I'd like to think that we will retain much of our current practice because I firmly believe, after all the years of being involved…in this institution, that we've got it pretty right…we have got a history behind us of evolution and accommodating the needs of the teaching profession. (Interviewee A)

Inherent in this language is a practical faith in our current practice and it was this faith that led us to gather our collective strength, clarify our position and approach the faculty leadership team to present a case to retain what we believed to be best practice within the Faculty of Education.

We presented the faculty leadership team with this statement:

> Physical education is not sports science. It is concerned with the pedagogy and practice of educating young people about body use, body care, and the fostering of physical competence that underpins all human learning. Therefore, physical education must be based clearly within the Faculty of Education, not the Faculty of Science. (Centre for Health and Physical Education Submission to Joint Task Force, 2003)

This was then followed by a statement from one of the participants, who wrote that when sport science and physical education are combined

> most often [they have] morphed into sports science or human movement studies or kinesiology…and staff have shifted from being physical educationalists to seeing themselves as scientists or sociologists or historians etc. So that, with time, the heart that centres on teaching and learning that takes place in schools disappears…. (Brian's letter to Dean, 1/4/05)

This again exemplifies a history of investment and acquired status within the field. Through these statements, the collective and my colleague were demonstrating not just our sense of belonging to the field but also an 'insiders'' knowledge of the field as perhaps only one who has a history of involvement and investment in the field can express.

However, the university and faculty leaders had a different perspective. When I asked the new Dean of the Faculty of Education if he was concerned that the essence of physical education may be lost if our BPE was merged into the sport and exercise science programme, he replied:

> I don't know that we really thought too much about that. I don't think anybody got quite as sort of specific as that …That said, I suppose if you asked most people who were not necessarily Phys Ed specialists … I suspect that the answer would come back in that area of science more than any other. (Personal interview, 6/06)

It is obvious that the Dean did not share the same career investment in the field of physical education. When I tried to explain the differences between sport and exercise science and physical education the Dean responded:

> Now it's natural once you merge with another institution, you tend to view things in terms of, well these people are not going to come and take anything we've got and I can understand that kind of thing, but I think you've got to build a bridge and get over

> it. At the end of the day, we're now part of this big institution that probably can contribute a great deal to what we do here…. (Personal interview, 6/06)

I also interviewed the Associate Dean of Faculty, asking for his view about merging sport and exercise science and health and physical education. His response was very similar to the Dean's:

> To me, that's [our reluctance to merge the two] your constraint. I think that it's a psychological barrier. I have a sense that the barrier is one where people do feel, as you're describing it, as a real difference. I think it's a psychological difference. It does worry me that we're not going to make the best of the opportunity to pull those two things together because we're sitting in, it seems to me, opposing camps to some extent and making demands of each other or not, as the case may be. (Personal interview, 3/05)

The Dean and Associate Dean dismissed our 'insiders'' view as being self-centred and a psychological barrier to what they believed to be the greater opportunities offered by such a merger. They did not have the vested interest that we had in our established logic of practice and were not so concerned about the potential loss of symbolic capital that we sensed. They did not have a career-defining sense of identity and belonging to our field as we did. Although our sense of illusio had blinded us to the greater opportunities that they were hoping for, it also enabled us to see the unexamined and unintentional outcomes that the faculty leaders were unable to see.

To conclude, in this research project Bourdieu's theoretical framework provided me with the intellectual tools to examine and better understand the nature of our practice. They also enabled me to examine the conditions of our doxic state and the state of illusio that had been established due our history of involvement in our field of practice. But more importantly, Bourdieu's call for social reflexivity using these tools enabled me to see beyond the blindness of practical faith and to recognise the difference perspectives of both my colleagues and the faculty leaders. It enabled me see blind spots and visionary thinking in our own positioning, and equally it enabled me to see the blind spots in the leaders' thinking and their different level of investment in our field during this merger.

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