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Bourdieu's reflexive sociology and 'spaces of points of view': whose reflexivity, which perspective?

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This paper considers Bourdieu's concepts of perspectivism and reflexivity, looking particularly at how he develops arguments about these in his recent work, *The Weight of the World* (1999) and *Pascalian Meditations* (2000b). We explicate Bourdieu's distinctive purposes and deployment of these terms and approaches, and discuss how this compares with related methodological and theoretical approaches currently found in social and feminist theory. We begin by considering three main ways in which 'reflexivity' is deployed in current sociological writing, distinguishing between reflexive sociology and a sociology of reflexivity. This is followed by a discussion of the main aspects of Bourdieu's approach to 'reflexive sociology' and its relation to his concepts of social field, perspectivism and spaces of point of view. He argues that we need to interrogate the idea of a single 'perspective' and account especially for the particularity and influence of the 'scholastic' point of view. He characterizes this latter point of view as unaware of its own historicity and as largely concerned with contemplation and with treating ideas primarily as abstractions (Bourdieu, 2000b). Bourdieu's intervention is to argue, as he has throughout his work, for a more reflexive account of one's location and habitus, and for sustained engagement with ideas and social issues as practical problems. Bourdieu exhorts researchers to work with 'multiple perspectives' (Bourdieu *et al.*, 1999, p. 3), the various competing 'spaces of points of view', without collapsing into subjectivism or relativism. We then consider recent feminist engagements with and critiques of Bourdieu's notion of reflexivity and chart some of the main points of contention regarding its relevance and conceptual potential for theorizing gender identities and transformations in current times. We conclude with a brief outline of how we are working with a reflexive sociological approach in a cross-generational study of young women in difficult circumstances, 'on the margins' of education and work.

Introduction

Bourdieu's signature concepts of habitus, field and capitals have long attracted interest among sociologists of education. And, they have been variously adopted and adapted by feminists in education to examine gender/class identities and relations

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(Reay, 1995; Reay, 1998; Skeggs, 1997; Lawler, 1999). Here we enter the field of 'Bourdieu and education' from a different angle, focusing on and problematizing his reflexive sociology in general and, particularly, his concepts of perspectivism and spaces of point of view. To assist, we bring Bourdieu's reflexive sociology into critical tension with relevant feminist scholarship and with sociological theorizing about 'reflexive modernity'. Specifically, we bring forward feminist debates about Bourdieu's reflexivity and about the reflexive modernity thesis, and relate these to each other. Our purpose is to lay out the parameters of the rich conversations that are currently underway in certain intellectual fields beyond the sociology of education and to put some of the issues that arise more firmly on the agenda of educational sociology and feminist studies of education.

We begin by considering three main ways in which 'reflexivity' is deployed in current sociological writing, distinguishing between reflexive sociology and a sociology of reflexivity. This is followed by a discussion of the main aspects of Bourdieu's approach to 'reflexive sociology' and its relation to his concepts of social field, perspectivism and spaces of point of view. We then consider recent feminist engagements with and critiques of Bourdieu's notion of reflexivity, and chart some of the main points of contention regarding its relevance and conceptual potential for theorizing gender identities and transformations in current times. We conclude with a brief outline of how we are working with a reflexive sociological approach in a cross-generational study of young women in difficult circumstances.¹

Whose reflexivity?

Reflexivity is a much-used term, over-determined and under-defined (Pillow, 2003) with a multivalent lineage, but we can nevertheless identify three main ways in which it is commonly used in current sociological work in education. First, reflexivity is marked as a characteristic of contemporary biographies (generating studies on reflexivity as an ontological category) and a structural artefact of late/high modernity. This is typically associated with the work of theorists such as Giddens (1991), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) and Bauman (2000), who variously argue that prescribed roles and identities are replaced by the imperative to self-consciously and reflexively construct one's own identity. Giddens suggests that there is an increasing tendency to self-monitoring, so that 'we are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves' (Giddens, 1991, p. 75). Beck writes that 'reflexive modernisation dissolves traditional parameters of industrial society: class culture and consciousness, gender and family roles', and describes this as a process of detraditionalization that 'happen[s] in a social surge of individualisation' (Beck, 1992, p. 87).² He further argues that: 'Individualisation of life situations and processes thus means that biographies become *self-reflexive*; (italics in original) socially-prescribed biography is transformed into biography that is self-produced and continues to be produced' (1992, p. 135). Claims concerning the manner and extent to which gender norms specifically are becoming 'detraditionalized', as well as the extent to which reflexivity is a generalized or (gender) differentiated attribute, have

been the subject of an emerging feminist debate (Adkins, 2000; Kenway & Kelly, 2000; McLeod, 2002). We return to these matters later, relate them to feminist engagements with Bourdieu's account of reflexivity and consider the conceptual potential (and limits) of his sociological project for theorizing gender identities and transformations.

Second, reflexivity is lauded as a necessary methodological stance, particularly in feminist and post-structuralist research. Indeed, it has become somewhat of an imperative, a doxa of post-positivist educational research that the researcher situate themselves, 'own' their investments and constructions in the research process and in the production of both meaning and 'partial' truths. These methodological interventions are significant, and unsettle and reframe many epistemological claims of research (St Pierre & Pillow, 2000; Scheurich, 1995; Behar, 1996; Stronach & MacLure, 1997). Pillow (2003), for example, attends to the relationship between practices of reflexivity and the politics of representation. Pillow observes that being reflexive, about one's role and effect as a researcher, is said to offer both greater 'ethnographic authority' and also to throw into question the very act and aspiration of representation. Often characterized as representing an 'autobiographical turn' in qualitative methodologies, reflexivity is frequently deployed in a relatively weak and mono-logical sense to denote the researcher 'reflecting' on the effect of their presence on the conduct and interpretation of the research. Again, this has not been unimportant,³ but it is a milder and more limited form of researcher reflexivity than Bourdieu advocates, as we will demonstrate shortly. 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. The third use of reflexivity, and the one with which we are most concerned here, pertains to both what Bourdieu regards as a necessary reflexivity of the field of sociology, and to the practice of reflexively situating and historicizing the space of one's point of view as a scholar and a sociologist.

Bourdieu's reflexive sociology

[Reflexivity calls] less for intellectual introspection than for the permanent sociological analysis and control of sociological practice ... It entails ... the systematic exploration of the 'unthought categories of thought which delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought'. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 40)

... the sociologist might seem to be threatened with a kind of schizophrenia, in as much as he [sic] is condemned to speak of historicity and relativity in a discourse that aspires to universality and objectivity. (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 93)

In order to unpack these statements it is helpful to move outwards to some key propositions underpinning Bourdieu's thinking. A central element of Bourdieu's work is his attempt to undermine the dualisms of objectivism and subjectivism, structure and agent, determinism and phenomenology. The concepts of habitus and field (discussed elsewhere in the present special issue) are intended to offer an alternative conceptualization of the subject, as socially embedded, as embodied dispositions, shaped by one's location within social fields. 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 or agents (Lovell, 2000; McNay, 2000; Arnot, 2002; Webb *et al.*, 2002; McLeod, 2004). Judith Butler, for example, characterizes the field/habitus relation as essentially one in which habitus encounters the field, and submits, dominated by the compelling objectivity and authority of the field (Butler, 1999).⁴ The relationship between field and habitus, and correspondingly between 'position' (within the field) and 'disposition', is central to Bourdieu's understanding of reflexivity.

'To each of the fields there corresponds a fundamental point of view on the world', writes Bourdieu (2000, p. 99). The field of sociology thus produces its own intellectual dispositions and it is these and the epistemic history and unconscious of the field (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 99) that must be interrogated, rather than the apparently idiosyncratic view points of the individual researcher. It is via this process that the reflexive researcher can uncover and 'systematically explore the "unthought categories of thought which delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought"' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 40). Wacquant argues that Bourdieu's reflexivity differs from other uses of the term in three crucial ways. In the first instance, it attends not to the analysis of individuals, but to the '*social and intellectual unconscious* embedded in analytic tools and operations' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 36; italics in original). Second, such investigations must be recognized as a '*collective enterprise*', a systematic characteristic of the practice of sociological work rather than only the work of individual sociologists. Finally, this historicizing and scrutinizing imperative is not intended to undermine, 'but to buttress the epistemological security of sociology' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 36; italics in original). In summary, reflexivity for Bourdieu does not refer simply to endless textual and autobiographical referentiality, or to the unconscious dispositions of the individual researcher, but to an examination of the 'epistemological unconscious' and the 'social organisation' of the discipline (or field) of sociology (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 40). Similarly, Schirato and Webb (2003, p. 545) summarize the main aspects of Bourdieu's reflexivity as involving the 'interrogation of three types of limitations'. The first examines the social origins of the researcher; the second the researcher's position within 'the microcosm of the academic field' (e.g. sociology) (see also Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 39). The third aspect is arguably, in their view, Bourdieu's most distinctive contribution to discussions of reflexivity—the interrogation of the 'scholastic point of view' (Schirato & Webb, 2003, p. 545).

The scholastic point of view refers to an intellectual bias, a set of dispositions and

perspectives that is produced within the academic field. According to Bourdieu, there are two main dangers of this scholastic point of view. One is its relative indifference to the 'logic of practice' and its tendency to 'to abstract practices from their contexts, and see them as ideas to be contemplated rather than as problems to be addressed or solved' (Schirato & Webb, 2003, p. 545; see also Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 39). The second is a kind of forgetting and erasure, whereby the scholastic view masquerades as a natural and objective point of view; as a perspective without history.

Perspective, in its historical definition, is no doubt the most accomplished realisation of the scholastic vision. It presupposes a single, fixed point of view—and therefore the adoption of the posture of a motionless spectator installed at a point (of view) — and also the use of a frame that cuts out, encloses and abstracts the spectacle with a rigorous, immobile boundary ... This singular viewpoint can also be regarded as universal, since all the 'subjects' who find themselves placed there—bodies reduced to a pure gaze, and therefore indifferent and interchangeable—are like the Kantian subject, assured of having the same objective view ... Thus perspective presupposes a point of view on which no point of view can be taken ... And the only way to get a point of view on this blind spot is to put perspective into historical perspective. (Bourdieu, 2000, pp. 21–22)

Arising from this argument, several additional clarifications and concerns need to be noted before we return to 'perspective' and 'perspectivism' in Bourdieu's methodological rationale for *The Weight of the World* (Bourdieu *et al.*, 1999).

According to Bourdieu, the view point of the intellectual is a particular perspective, not simply the expression of an individual view point, but an analytic disposition that is part of, formed in and by, the 'collective unconscious' of an academic field. This field structures modes and conventions of thinking within itself. The academic field includes accumulating practices and habits of thought of individual academics (in his examples, often sociologists), but is not reducible to such individuals. This has the potential to produce the 'scholastic fallacy' that Bourdieu repudiates. It demands a restless and radical historicity, which Bourdieu advocates, and this involves a continuously rigorous understanding of the conditions and frames of its own analysis and modes of thought. Such reflexive sociology includes scrutiny of how the scholastic view is privileged, and Bourdieu describes his own identification and historicization of the 'scholastic fallacy' as an example of reflexivity (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 121). Bourdieu thus seeks to renounce 'scholasticism'. However, Schirato and Webb (2003) highlight a double-edged, paradoxical quality to the effects of a scholastic habit of thinking. Following the logic of Bourdieu, they argue that reflexivity itself is a general habit of thought with a history, that it too is formed in particular scholarly fields. It is precisely these scholarly fields that dispose subjects to the kind of historicizing and reflexivity called for by Bourdieu. They thus suggest that 'the scholastic point of view is therefore, simultaneously, both a potential impediment to, and a condition (almost necessary) of the production of reflexive knowledge' (Schirato & Webb, 2003, p. 551).

It is our view that Bourdieu overstates the distinctiveness of his project of reflexivity. In large part, his argument proceeds by opposing itself to a monolithic and simple positivism, with little, if any, acknowledgement of the diverse and sustained

challenges that have been posed to that, from within sociology itself and particularly from the fields of feminist and post-colonial scholarship. His enactment of reflexivity tends to a kind of heroic stance against what he sees as the blindness and ahistoricity of an homogenized field of scholarly practice that insists naively upon its own singular and objective authority, oblivious to the perspectives of 'others'. To be sure, he characterizes significant dangers and tendencies, some of which may be more prominent in some kinds of sociological work than others, and more prominent in some institutional and national spaces than others. But there is striking neglect of debates within the range of poststructural methodologies (Lather, 1991; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Philips & Burbules, 2000), and especially methodological concerns and innovations within feminist and postcolonial fields (Harding, 1987; Spivak, 1990; Reinharz, 1992; Smith, 1999) that have for some time been widely acknowledged within the social sciences, as well as the humanities. This scholarship encompasses sustained attention to questions of 'standpoint', it unsettles the authority of objectivity and the idea of 'male as human', it asks whether the 'subaltern can speak?' and reframes enquiry to investigate how one perspective is naturalized and that of the 'other' systematically silenced. In many respects this range of work exemplifies precisely the kind of reflexivity Bourdieu advocates. It destabilizes the authority of a singular perspective, it looks to the structural and historical relations that produced the illusion of that authority, and it frequently has an agenda oriented to social change. Shortly we will outline various claims about the intellectual dispositions of *The Weight of the World* and point to some of the criticisms of it that are derived from this broad body of scholarship. But first, let us outline the project itself and consider some of Bourdieu's claims about it.

Which perspective?

In *Pascalian Meditations* (2000), Bourdieu elaborated his history of the 'scholastic fallacy', and of the idea of 'perspective'. His methodological approach is illustrated in *The Weight of the World* (Bourdieu *et al.*, 1999), a powerful interview-based account of how 'ordinary people' are negotiating their lives in a time of major social, cultural and economic upheaval. The study is about how the poor and the powerless inhabit these changes and the 'lucidity of the excluded' (McNay, 1999, p. 107)—the critical insights that arise from people's exclusion. The final essay in this volume, 'Understanding', offers a reflection on his guiding methodological principles and the challenge of researching and respecting perspectives and spaces of point of view in a large empirical interview-based project. The essay explains how the interview methods employed for the book seek to gain access to popular consciousness, to illuminate why people act in particular ways and to identify potential spaces for transformation. In particular, they seek to identify the structures of feeling, predominantly disillusionment and sorrow, among those most exposed to the dominations associated with the restructuring of the economy and the state—they provide interpretive experience of and 'lay bare great and little miseries' (Fowler, 1996, pp. 1–2). Bourdieu recounts that as much as possible they tried to establish a

research relationship based on '*active and methodical listening*' with the aim to '*reduce as much as possible the symbolic violence exerted through that relationship*' (Bourdieu *et al.*, 1999, p. 609; italics in original). The experience of listening and interpreting requires a kind of subordination and re-invention, whereby, he argues, the interviewer, 'through *forgetfulness of self*, aims at a true conversion of the way we look at other people in the ordinary circumstances of their lives' (Bourdieu *et al.*, 1999, p. 614; italics in original). This project then is clearly linked to Bourdieu's long-term imperative to unsettle the authority of the scholastic perspective, and to be alive to the character, lineage and space of other points of view—as discussed earlier.

The many interviews and the structure of the book present the perspectives of different groups of people who are affected by a common experience—for example, life on a housing estate. Bourdieu describes this as a necessary 'perspectivism'. 'We must work' he argues, 'with the multiple perspectives that correspond to the multiplicity of coexisting, and sometimes directly competing, points of view' (Bourdieu *et al.*, 1999, pp. 3–4). The approach adopted by Bourdieu and his team of researchers was to listen attentively to the detail of people's lives in order to read the effects of 'objective relations' in the apparently idiosyncratic. They interpreted interviews not only as the expression of individualized suffering, but as evidence too of the organizing, underlying and relatively systematic principles, relations, and structures that govern particular lives. In Bourdieu-ian terms, the aim was to document, again, the interactions between position in social space/field and disposition. In relation to interpreting interviews with schoolgirls, Bourdieu advises:

Contrary to what might be believed from a naively personalist view of the uniqueness of the social persons, it is the uncovering of immanent structures contained in the contingent statements of a discrete interaction that alone allows one to grasp the essential of each girl's *idiosyncasy* and all the singular complexity of her actions and reactions... Although these trajectories belong to the past, for the girls they continue to orientate their vision of their past and of their educational future, and also of themselves, in their most singular aspects. (Bourdieu *et al.*, 1999, p. 618)

Such an approach to empirical inquiry generally, and to reading an interview particularly, is illuminating and important in terms of the sociological project Bourdieu advocates, but it also has its limitations. In order to explain both we will focus here on two different responses to the principles of inquiry that underlie the *Weight of the World* project—those of Bridget Fowler (1996) and Angela McRobbie (2002). By and large Fowler is enthusiastic about Bourdieu's theory of practice, his 'perspectively enriched realism' and 'mature reflections on the craft of sociology' (Fowler, 1996, pp. 1–3) and about the manner in which these translate into the approach to the interviews taken by himself and his co researchers. She argues that *The Weight of the World* seeks to establish a sociology based on objective as well as subjective possibilities, and which also explains the conditions of its own research production (Fowler, 1996, pp. 7–9). She appreciates the attempts throughout the book via the commentaries alongside the interviews, to demonstrate 'para-doxal' thought that 'locates the interviewees within the underlying social relations that set limits to their action' (the objectivation of the agent); but also the attempts to

acknowledge the agents' practical proficiency (Fowler, 1996, p. 3). She explains how the interviews and the associated commentaries illustrate Bourdieu's notion of habitus; that is, 'how people construct the world and are constructed by it'—more particularly, how 'people's readings of their situation are founded on patterned socially generated classifications of the world with multiple associations of a moral and aesthetic kind' (Fowler, 1996, p. 11).

Fowler observes that *The Weight of the World* is part of Bourdieu's search for a method that will elicit genuine and emblematic responses; actors' own ways of representing the field, not the researcher's 'imposition effect'. This imperative is also forcefully articulated in *Pascalian Meditations*. As she explains, the mode of selecting interviewees (frequently personal associations) and the interviews themselves seek to avoid the symbolic violence often associated with positivist research processes. And she seems to agree with Bourdieu that, in general, they achieve this 'valid objectivation' of the interviewees. This includes a 'double sociodicy' (Fowler, 1996, p. 13) in which the reflexive imperative of the sociologist must be applied to the interview in two further ways. The interviewee must not just be subjected to the researchers' viewpoint and the interviewer must be aware of the impact of social structure on the interview process and the interviewers themselves. Fowler claims that Bourdieu's clarifications of the practical dilemmas of social research and the methods adopted are fresh and provocative, they encourage and reveal complexity, and the published interviews have a 'directness and immediacy'. Fowler's remarkably restrained and restricted objections to Bourdieu's claims are directed towards his unconditional support of ethnographic fieldwork, particularly the unstructured interview, and his unreserved rejection of other methods. This, she says, undermines the credibility of his earlier work, which employed a range of such methods, and also fails to acknowledge the possibility that such methods may not always be symbolically violent. Notably, her critique is only marginally informed by the feminist and postcolonial scholarship we mentioned earlier and, thus does not adequately take up the Bourdieu-ian historicizing and scrutinizing imperative.

In contrast, McRobbie is scathing in her critique and argues that Bourdieu and his team fail to live up to Bourdieu's ambitions for the text and indeed to the politics they subscribe to. She suggests that they are too self-congratulatory about their own methodologies, their attempts to 'give voice' to the unvoiced and their claims about the power of their interview style to provoke a self and structural reflexive awareness on the part of the interviewee. Overall she argues, in effect, that this is not reflexive sociology because, despite allusions to the habitus of those interviewed, there is too much reliance on their decontextualized voices. Voices 'of pain', she says, are not enough 'without the wider web of social relations in which they are embedded, these testimonies exist merely as the stated truths of personal experience' (McRobbie, 2002, p. 131). While in Fowler's view this might represent 'perspectively enriched realism', in McRobbie's view much about the interviews is 'banal, repetitious and aggrieved' (2002, p. 130), 'mere reportage of degrees of misfortune and involving lives torn from context and lacking in "thick description"' (2002, p. 136). She also objects to some of the commentaries that she views as invoking crude and commonsense

sociological understanding, and as overconfident in their 'assumption of knowledge of the other' (McRobbie, 2002, p. 132).

In terms of 'double sociodicy' she is also unconvinced, suggesting that the researchers are unreflexive in several further ways. She offers examples of where the interviewers' techniques have an 'imposition effect'. She points to the authors' failure to sufficiently acknowledge their own research fields with regard to previous feminist and anthropological scholarship about the complicated ethics of research and about 'democratic ethnographic modalities' (McRobbie, 2002, p. 136). She thus casts doubt on Fowler's claims about the freshness of the approach. Further, she implicitly argues that the book does not deal with racial issues in a 'para-doxal' manner. McRobbie cites a number of sophisticated studies that do not reduce contemporary white, working-class racism to an effect of recent economic and political restructuring, and argues that the authors' failure to benefit from such analyses and to 'attempt to theorize these social antagonisms' is an unfortunate side effect of its 'methodologies of intimacy and empathy'. It is also her view that the text has some major blind spots associated with its focus on misery. She sees Bourdieu's world as 'a stark, atrophied place without hope', which fails to recognize that 'even the poor and the dispossessed partake in some forms of cultural enjoyment which are collective resources which make people what they are' (McRobbie, 2002, p. 137). Indeed, she goes so far as to argue that ' "misery" is an effect of the utilization of managed research techniques such as those employed in this Project' (McRobbie, 2002, p. 135); in short, their up-close and personal perspectivism. Again, she indicates that the researchers have in effect been unreflexively disciplined by their discipline (sociology), and refused the insights offered by other discipline that, in this case (cultural studies), might have alerted them to the 'things which co-exist with suffering and disadvantage ... which to a certain extent alleviate' it and that include 'language and humour ... and "the art of making do" '.

Our view, along with Fowler's, is that *The Weight of the World* is a valiant and landmark attempt to practice Bourdieu's reflexive sociology and, not incidentally, a very moving and politically motivating account of the personally hurtful human and socially damaging consequences of contemporary economic and political restructuring. However, like McRobbie we have some concerns, not the least being Bourdieu's depiction of the hegemony of positivism, and his related neglect of other politically and intellectually significant challenges to its 'fallacies'. Ultimately, questions remain about how reflexive the project actually is; about how adequately it interrogates sociology's rules of practice and conduct. Indeed, McRobbie's critique suggests that the intellectual field of sociology, as represented by *The Weight of the World*, has difficulty working across intellectual fields and, in turn, this raises questions about the capacity of Bourdieu's thought on intellectual fields to deal with the intellectual dispositions, epistemic history and collective unconscious of inter-disciplinarity; which in sense has become a field. Sociologically reflexive as *The Weight of the World* may claim to be, it is nonetheless firmly and unreflexively positioned within the field of sociology. In the context of this disciplinary constraint, however, and given the prominence in European sociology of the reflexive modernity thesis, it is something of

an irony that Bourdieu's *Weight of the World* works with a relatively confined understanding of reflexivity, as a deliberate political and intellectual orientation, one that is more readily cultivated in some fields than others. His work stands in sharp contrast to the more generalized contemporary form of reflexive identity as articulated by theorists of reflexive modernity. Indeed, he tends to ignore such work.

Feminist engagements

We now turn to feminist engagements with recent debates in the sociology of reflexive modernity, the associated claims about detraditionalization and individualization mentioned earlier, and related concerns about gender and agency. In so doing we offer some alternative ways of engaging Bourdieu's reflexivity from a feminist 'perspective'. For, as we will show, certain scholars who critically engage such ideas from a feminist perspective draw on the work of Bourdieu to assist their critique clearly recognize the conceptual potential of Bourdieu's work for theorizing gender identities and transformations. Surprisingly, there is not much feminist literature on the sociology of reflexive modernity generally or on the associated arguments about the detraditionalization of gender. However, two key writers are Lisa Adkins (2002b) and Lois McNay (2000), and both are interested in gender reflexivity and gender transformation in current times. Their work is partly in response to the claims that social structures are declining in social significance and that this has been accompanied by increasing agency with regard to the rules and norms of social life. Of particular interest is the claim that gender, sexuality and other inter-related axes of difference, power and inequality are being detraditionalized and replaced by processes of individualization where-in people (agents) increasingly make reflexive decisions about their biographical projects (self-reflexivity), and indeed reflect on the conditions of their existence (structural reflexivity) and so invent their own certainties.

McNay (1999, 2000) focuses on questions associated with agency and change. She is concerned with the embedded, embodied and pre-reflexive aspects of identity and with their implications for reflexivity, arguing that certain aspects of gender are not particularly open to reflexive self-transformation. Indeed, in her view, the notions of reflexive identity developed by reflexive modernization theorists are voluntaristic and 'over emphasise the expressive possibilities' (McNay, 1999, p. 109) of detraditionization. In short she argues that in much contemporary social theory there is insufficient differentiation in accounts of gender norms. Bourdieu's insistence on embodiment (through habitus) and structurally differentiated social fields, she suggests, offers potentially better ways of conceptualizing gender, identity and change. However, in her view, this potential is not fully realized in Bourdieu's own work. He 'significantly underestimates the ambiguities and dissonances that exist in the way that men and women occupy masculine and feminine positions' (McNay, 1999, p. 107) and this is because he has not adequately linked his notion of habitus with that of field. That is to say, Bourdieu fails 'to bring the conceptual implications of the idea of the field, most notably that of societal differentiation, to bear on the idea of habitus'. Consequently, there is an 'over-emphasis on the alignment that the habitus establishes between

subjective dispositions and the objective structure of the field with regard to gender identities' (McNay, 1999, p. 107). Bourdieu is, she argues, inattentive to both the 'internally complex nature of subjectivity' (McNay, 2000, p. 72) and the impact of particular social/historical changes on how women inhabit, experience, move across, change and are changed by new and emerging social fields, as well as by gender relations within existing fields. He attributes a durability to gender norms, while McNay argues for greater recognition of the instability of gender norms (McLeod, 2003). This assessment derives from an understanding of reflexivity as arising from experiences of contradiction and dislocation as one 'crosses fields'.

Current times have involved not only the proliferation of fields as Bourdieu argues, but also the feminization of many fields and, paradoxically, the destabilization of gender binaries; at least according to McNay. In turn, this has produced, she argues, more complex social differentiation within certain fields and has resulted in hybrid gender experiences—complex processes of investment and negotiations that go beyond conventional gender and other binaries. These enhance the possibilities for reflexive awareness about gender—structural reflexivity (McNay, 1999, p. 105). While she is critical of Bourdieu, he nonetheless assists her analysis of specific forms of the detraditionalization of gender via his notion of reflexivity that, unlike that of the reflexive modernization theorists, insists that reflexivity is linked to position and relations within fields. Taking this point one step further, McNay argues that detraditionalization is also linked to the tension and conflicts between fields. She argues that gender reflexivity potentially arises as result of mobility between and within social fields and as a result of the requirement to reconcile the dissonant experiences that this invokes. In other words, the requirement is to deal with a 'lack of fit' between gendered habitus and field. Women, McNay suggests, experience degrees of both autonomy and subordination as they move across such social fields as the labour market, domestic life and the intimate. She disputes, for example, the standard gendered binaries of public and private, and breaks down the 'private' ('women's domain') into more distinct spheres; to avoid conflating the private with the domestic and to separate the intimate from the domestic (McNay, 1999, p. 112). Recognizing the varying and even contradictory effects of the dispositions produced in such social fields will produce, she argues, a more nuanced account of gender than the 'invariant logic' of sexual division suggested by Bourdieu in, say, *Masculine Domination* (2001). Such recognition alerts one to the ambiguities and unevenness of gender as women are embedded in and move across such fields. Also following Bourdieu, McNay points out that gender reflexivity is linked to social differentiation and is thus unevenly manifest within and across fields.

Despite her many qualifications about Bourdieu's analysis of gender, McNay nonetheless approves of aspects of Bourdieu's theory of identity for it is neither voluntaristic nor deterministic, recognizing both constraint and creativity and involving 'regulated liberties' (McNay, 1999, p. 105). It also recognizes those 'pre-reflexive' instinctive and non-cognitive levels of practice that constitute and are constituted by the social. According to McNay these are an important aspect of gender identity and performance but are not readily amenable to reflexive self-

invention. Indeed, the pre-reflexive aspects of identity may make the changes noted earlier difficult and may entrench rather than alter gendered norms for ‘the habitus continues to work long after the conditions of its emergence have been dislodged’ (McNay, 1999, p. 103). McNay is critical of those theorists, including Butler and Lash, who fetishize the ‘indeterminacy of social structures’ and the ‘constitutive instability of symbolic systems’ and who equate these with notions of emancipation or politics. She describes this as a ‘short circuited move from the ontological to the political’, an elision between symbolic detraditionalization and social detraditionalization (McNay, 1999, p. 106).⁵

Adkins (2002a,b) argument, which draws quite heavily upon McNay’s in some respects but argues against them in others, is that most key theorists of reflexive modernization, particularly Giddens and Beck, do not attend sufficiently to *new* forms of identification, conflict and inequality associated with gender and sexuality. Notably, Adkins argues that contemporary processes of reflexivity and mobility reconfigure gender and sexuality and lead to new articulations of them; indeed, they provide ‘new grounds for forms of post structural classification’ (2002, p. 8). She takes this analysis in a number of different directions, but we are concerned with her arguments in support of ‘embodied, embedded, situated, contested’ (Adkins, 2002b, p. 11) notions of the detraditionalization of gender and of gendered reflexivity; her concern about the retraditionalization of gender, and her particular focus on the aesthetic dimensions of reflexivity. These have implications for Bourdieu’s reflexivity and also for theories of reflexive modernity constructed by those she calls ‘reflexivity theorists’—notably, Bourdieu is excluded from this category.

Adkins (2002b) is less sanguine about current times than McNay, and argues that despite the increased dissonance and mobility between and within social fields and the associated rise of reflexivity, this does not necessarily mean that gender is unambiguously detraditionalized, as the reflexive modernity theorists suggest and as McNay implies. Rather, she suggests that ‘gender is being re-inscribed in new but old ways’ (McLeod, 2002), which actually involve a form of reflexivity—but certainly not the sort invoked by Bourdieu, which involves a reflection on one’s conditions of existence—or structural reflexivity. She argues that ‘reflexivity theorists’ have exaggerated the potential for and effects of gender detraditionalization. They fail to ‘register that reflexivity does not concern a liberal freedom from gender, but may be tied into new arrangements of gender’ (Adkins, 2000a, p. 12), and these may involve the retraditionalization of gender. In response to one of McNay’s key claims, she says:

the idea of the transposition of the feminine habitus ‘into’ the economy, which leads to a lack of fit between habitus and field, the take up of a reflexive stance towards gender, and to a process of detraditionalization may be a less than adequate conceptualization of the reconfiguring of gender and gender identities in late modernity. (Adkins, 2002a, p. 12)

Adkins makes the case that to get the best analytical purchase on contemporary manifestations and politics of gender and sexuality and of gender transformations, recent social theories of reflexive modernization and cultural theories of performativity associated with Butler particularly must be understood together. Sociological

and historicized studies of culture such as those conducted by Bourdieu are insufficient in her view. In part, this is because the aesthetic dimensions of reflexivity are central to the reconfiguration of gender. And this leads her into debates about the relationship between the social (e.g. the state, institutions, the economy) and the cultural (e.g. linguistic and discursive practices) in the constitution and transformation of gender and sexuality. Such debates have gained considerable prominence in feminist circles as a result of the high-profile exchanges between and feminist polarizations around Nancy Fraser (the social, the economic and methods associated with historicization) and Judith Butler ('the performative constitution of gender via the linguistic repetition of discursive conventions' and methods associated with deconstruction). (Adkins, 2002b, p. 19) Adkins deploys these exchanges to develop her case that not only must the social and cultural and methods of historicization and deconstruction be in analytical conversation, but that such conversations have the potential to enhance theories of reflexive modernity as well as those of Bourdieu and McNay. For instance, she assembles the argument that the social relations of consumer capitalism along with the associated aestheticization of everyday life have intensified the performative 'lifestylization' of gender and sexuality, which in turn contributes to detraditionalization and individualization. But she also argues that uneven manifestations of aesthetic reflexivity are central to the new manifestations of classification and division associated with sexuality and gender. This offers a somewhat new slant on Bourdieu's notions of reflexivity foregrounding the field of gendered and sexualized consumption in relation to structural reflexivity. It also points to possible new directions for sociological studies of taste and style that seek to build on the lines of inquiry developed in Bourdieu's (1984) *Distinction* taking into account new classifications and distinctions associated with self and structural aesthetic reflexivity.

A concluding example

Rather than providing a conclusion to this paper we will offer an example of our attempts to practice Bourdieu's reflexive sociology with a feminist inflection. In so doing we bring together a number of the ideas discussed thus far associated with Bourdieu's reflexive sociology and *The Weight of the World*, as well as feminist engagements with them. These provide the epistemological and methodological resources for our study of young women who are positioned on the margins of the fields of school and work, and who are also responding to and negotiating multiple social fields in transformed and transforming times.

Earlier, we identified Bourdieu's concern about a scholastic point of view that involves a tendency towards the abstraction of the 'logic of practice' and an associated distancing from the problems to be addressed. This study seeks to avoid this tendency, and to explore empirically and reflexively some of the key ideas and abstractions developed in the work of theorists such as McNay and Adkins. Our study grew out of our concern about the indifference demonstrated by public policy and media to young women leading difficult lives. Central to this study are such girls at

school, young women who left school early and their mothers, all of whom are economically, culturally and spatially subordinate—they live on the fringe of cities, and are economically vulnerable and often culturally stigmatized (Bullen & Kenway, 2004).

As we have explained, Bourdieu argues that in contemporary life there has been a proliferation of social fields. He points to the methodological and conceptual challenge of researching this alongside what he calls ‘positional suffering’. In the context of such proliferation of fields and intensification of ‘positional suffering’, we are investigating, in two different city fringe sites, these two groups of young women and their mothers. All are particularly vulnerable to the kinds of social changes implied in the ‘positional suffering’ analysis, but also to other changes as well as to ongoing oppressive social and cultural practices (Allard & McLeod, 2003). Our research sites are where the city meets the country, where cheap and quite expensive housing estates have sprung up alongside each other and alongside what remains of country towns. Those with very little live next to those with plenty. In these city fringe locations, an assortment of histories and habits collide to produce new local dynamics. In the neighbourhood, jobs are either poorly paid or in short supply. Suburban expansion has outstripped the provision of public infrastructure and services in these fringe vicinities, and the existing infrastructure is being depleted as a result of a series of governments’ fiscal austerity measures. Until recently, many key social services, such as Job Centres, have not been available locally, and others, such as social security and Medicare, have been accessible only via public transport, which remains infrequent. Suburban expansion has also included the growth of large shopping complexes that service many suburbs including those on the city fringe. These provide a form of local entertainment where other forms are lacking. But for the young women, particularly at one of the sites, even access to such forms of entertainment remains difficult due to the limited availability and cost of public transport.

Our project is similar to *The Weight of the World’s* perspectivism in that it considers the diverse trajectories of individual girls and young women and mother–daughter pairs within and across particular social fields but in similar material and cultural circumstances. We identify the particular historical continuities and discontinuities that seem to matter most in these people’s lives. Like Bourdieu’s *Weight of the World*, the nature of the state and the economy are part of the story but so too are other social and cultural patterns, including those related to gender identities and dynamics. Our study seeks to explicate the embedded, embodied miseries that arise for girls and women in households on low incomes in contemporary circumstances. Some such miseries are related to patterns of male harassment, violence and abuse. Some arise from the neo-liberal restructuring of the state and the economy. Our study brings to light, for instance, the difficulties that arise when public education, transport, health and welfare systems are inadequate and unable to address the specific needs of young women and their mothers. For example, the difficulties young women encounter obtaining advice on sexual health and contraception when they need to travel away from the local area, or if they fear lack of privacy if they attend a local clinic. In both sites, there are few employment options for young women and no further education

institutions. While a university campus and a technical and further education college are accessible by public transport, many of the young women and their mothers remain unfamiliar with how to negotiate entry to such institutions, or to turn vague longings—'I'd like to go to uni' or 'I'll probably do some study'—into practical possibilities.

We also analyse what Bourdieu describes as *la petite misere* experienced by state workers (teachers, youth workers, welfare workers) who have witnessed first hand the contraction of the welfare state and the problems this creates for the poor. Yet there is also some ambivalence here, most notably among the teachers. On the one hand, they express concern and work hard to develop school programmes to assist these young women to stay on at school. On the other hand, they also operate as if success is not possible, invoking claims of the girls' lack of 'ambition' and 'family background' as sufficient explanations as to why they believe the girls will not succeed: girls' ambivalence towards school is interpreted as a sign of 'lack of ambition', confirmation of not able to get ahead. At one of the sites, teachers describe the students as

academically not strong. They haven't got great ambitions, and in particular the girls, overall they haven't got great ambitions. They don't want to go to University and become a lawyer or doctor anyway. They're pretty happy. At lot of them actually stay in the area too when they leave [school]

Some of the teachers are dismissive of the local area itself. 'Staying in the area' after leaving school represents a bad decision, evidence again of the girls' lack of ambition and 'know-how'. Happiness is a consolation prize in the face of economic and social difficulties. Community is seen as something from which the girls should escape, if they are 'to get on' and work against the inherent constraints of their 'family background', which does not provide the young women with the necessary resources or capabilities to move beyond it. Here, repudiating 'family background' and community is presented as the only rational pathway. While the official discourse of 'school retention' prevails, an equally powerful discourse about 'family background' works to displace some of the responsibility of schools and teachers to respond to this imperative for some of the most marginalized young people.

In this example, where we have been trying to understand the complex of attitudes surrounding young women's attitudes to and decisions about schooling, a 'perspectival' analysis of the competing and interlocking points of view helps illuminate the powerful and contradictory discourses that shape the field and associated policy and professional debate. The teachers shift between an official discourse (keep girls at school) and a more informal, although deeply-held professional commonsense, about family background and local community, producing a set of entrenched assumptions about gender and class that sit uneasily alongside attempts to change or improve the educational experiences and futures for young women.

Our study also seeks to draw out the survival strategies and pleasures and victories that are possible in the highly constrained circumstances experienced by the girls and their mothers. Many of these involve education. A group of teenage mothers has

returned to school and has stayed there to complete the year. Some older mothers have returned to study, completed their tertiary entry qualifications, or undertaken higher education. Some have chosen to study for social or youth work or law degrees in the hope that they may eventually provide to others like them, the sorts of help they themselves never had. Yet others have become student/parent activists working towards changing their school while at school.

The manner in which the young women and their mothers engage in ‘regulated improvisation’, make decisions and practice their self-hood is a key focus in relation to the cross-field trajectory of schooling, leaving school and life after school, and also in relation to their travels across the fields of school, home and work. Inspired by the work of McNay and Adkins, our questions include the following: ‘What field- and cross-field related ambiguities and dissonances do they experience? How do they negotiate these? What reflexive possibilities are available to them and what is the impact of the pre-reflexive aspects of their identity on their capacity to take up such opportunities?’

These questions allow us to empirically consider McNay’s claims about feminized fields, destabilized gender binaries and hybridized gender identities and, to the extent that they exist, what this means for the gender reflexivity of women and girls in poverty. Take one example of the directions such lines of inquiry take us. **A high level of pre-reflexive emotional intensity is a feature of some of these girls’ lives, which are characterized by extreme levels of ambiguity and dissonance within and between fields including transitory or stressful family formations with fleeting and unpredictable attachments to the labour market and fraught home–school relationships.** Their friendships with other girls can be ones of passionate and turbulent attachments and dependencies, and while this is a well-remarked characteristic of school girl friendships (Hey, 1997; McLeod, 2002), among these girls, friendships were negotiated with a notably intensity. These have their own explicit codes of behaviour and pre-reflexive features, both of which seem to be associated with their lived uncertainties and tensions, their ontological insecurity and their need for dependable and trustworthy figures in their lives. There is no ambiguity about the fact that these friendship codes transcend, and transgress if necessary, the rules of the game associated with the fields of home, school and work. Further, friendship transgressions result in further transgressions in other fields including violent assaults on each other at school and in public places. In a sense their emotional intensity associated with school girl friendship has destabilized their gender identities leading them, in some instances, to take up an anti-social form of ‘female masculinity’—offensive, aggressive, self-protective, self-destructive. In turn this produces further uncertainty and disharmony in their lives. What reflexive opportunities about such matters are available in their lives? Some of our research suggests, for instance, that it is not just the feminization of the teaching profession, but also the impact of feminism on some teachers that has opened up reflexive opportunities for these girls and young women at school. Such opportunities have included the formation of a ‘girls at risk’ (of leaving school early) and a young mothers’ groups. These have been valuable in assisting these young women to stay and survive at school and elsewhere in a number of cases.

However, as a result of their focus on necessity and survival they have tended to promote self rather than structural reflexivity. And, paradoxically, they have somewhat intensified rather than destabilized gender identities and binaries.

The cross-generational aspects of the project allow us to consider habitus and fields over time, to give space to the 'points of view' of the mothers about themselves and their field relationships in earlier times and also about themselves and their daughters in current times. Their perspectives help us to consider if there is now a 'lack of fit' between the young women's gendered habitus and the fields they enter and traverse? A comparison between the daughters' and the mothers' practice in and across key fields allows us to empirically examine Adkin's claims about new but uneven forms of identification, classification, distinction, conflict and inequality with regard to gender and sexuality. It also allows for an historically and culturally situated assessment of McNay's analysis of the disjunctions arising in gendered habitus by examining that phenomenon through cross-generational comparisons. The current inflections of gendered power and powerlessness within the poorest sections of Australian society are at issue here, as is the manner in which those females who live difficult lives exercise agency.

Like the researchers involved in *The Weight of the World*, we are conscious of the necessity of a 'double sociodicy' for this sort of research especially. We are mindful of its complicated ethics and have sought to adopt reflexive research practices and standpoints about the conditions of our own research production. But, like McRobbie, we are nevertheless keenly aware of the difficulty of avoiding the 'impositions effect' and of eliminating doxa. As feminist sociologists of education we seek to keep to the fore a consciousness of the 'space of our point of view'—of our own positions and dispositions within this field. 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. And, following Bourdieu's imperative for reflexive sociology, this project provides opportunities for critically examining and perhaps moving beyond some of the habits of thought of the intellectual field of gender and education. As we have indicated throughout, interrogating the concepts of 'reflexivity' and 'perspective', and their historical, sociological and methodological effects, can help to open spaces for such critical work.

Notes

1. Australian Research Council (Discovery Grant, 2002–2004), 'Young women negotiating from the margins of education and work; Towards gender justice in education and youth policies and programs'. This project is funded by an Australian Research Council, Discovery Grant, 2002–04. The principal researchers are Julie McLeod, Jane Kenway, Alison Mackinnon, Andrea Allard, with research and administrative support from Elizabeth Bullen, Katie Wright and Danni Sexton-Nicholas.
2. Individualization refers paradoxically both to 'individualism' and the obligation 'to standardize your own existence' in line with the imperatives of the labour market and governmental agencies (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p. 7).

3. This methodological compulsion is itself indicative of a broader popular and scholarly fascination with subjectivity (Mansfield, 2000; Bendle, 2002).
4. Butler argues that Bourdieu's staging of the relation between habitus and field as an encounter presumes 'that the habitus must be adjusted to the field and that an external relation between them will be traversed through the action by which a habitus submits to the rules of the field, thus becoming refashioned in order to become "congruent" or "compatible"/'. Hence the ideal of adaptation governs the relation between habitus and field, such that the field, often figured as preexisting or as social given, does not alter by virtue of the habitus, but the habitus always and only alters by virtue of the demands put upon it by the "objectivity" of the field' (Butler, 1999, p. 117).
5. For some reflexive modernity theorists, the aestheticization of society is associated with 'aesthetic dedifferentiation', which involves the intensification and destabilization of symbolic images. In turn this is associated with an intensified self-reflexivity with regard to gender. However, for McNay this 'forecloses an analysis of the power relations in which a reflexive management of the self is ineluctably embedded' (1999, p. 109) and 'ignores deeply entrenched forms of embodied existence' (1999, p. 113).

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