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What (a) to do about ‘impact’: a Bourdieusian critique

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Presented in the keynote symposium ‘Radical social theory for radical times: putting Bourdieu to work in educational research’ convened by Helen Colley at the *British Educational Research Association Conference*, University of Manchester, 4 September 2012.

Educational research in the UK faces some fundamental challenges today. We work in radical times: a period of deep global economic crisis, harsh national austerity measures, the intensification of neo-liberal policies, and grossly increasing socio-economic inequalities. These trends are putting educational research under pressure through restricted funding, the reshaping of research council agendas, and demands for ‘impact’¹ to show ‘value for money’ (ESRC, 2009; HEFCE, 2011). In his presidential address to the annual conference of the British Educational Research Association, John Gardner (2011) presented his response to this situation, focusing on how the ‘impact’ of our work might be improved. Notwithstanding a number of caveats in his address, he directed warnings at the educational research community that we are too inward-looking, and that our work is often not accessible enough to generate influence with policy-makers, the media and the general public.

Amongst these warnings, Gardner made two key arguments that I highlight here. First, he stated that impact among ‘policy makers, influencers and implementers in national, regional and local bodies...would be evidenced by their using our research to inform their work’ (p.547). His central question is: ‘does our work have the desired impact on the thinking and practice of these various groups?’ (p.547). If this begs the question of what or whose desires are at stake here, this is clarified later on, calling for us to ensure that our research “‘chimes” with the reasonable expectations and aspirations of the audience, without pandering to any inappropriate bias or partial interest’ (p.556). The government dismissal of the Cambridge Primary Review is given as an example of ‘political idealism’ which is clearly presented as unreasonable, but in a way which treats this as an exceptional aberration on the part of policy-makers: the charge of failing to ‘chime’ with reasonable expectations of research users remains levelled against the broad educational research community, leaving us with an implied assumption that policy makers’ and implementers’ expectations are usually ‘reasonable’.

Gardner’s second major target in explaining inadequate impact is not only that educational research is often too complex, but that ‘[in] *the pursuit of the holy grail of theory*, [researchers] also lose sight of alternative, simple and more plausible propositions’ (p.557, emphasis added). He considers

¹ Throughout this paper, I use the word ‘impact’ in inverted commas to denote its socially constructed definition in the terms of HEFCE’s REF and research council strategy papers. When used without inverted commas, I use it largely to denote the broader meaning of influence which researchers might wish their work to have. This too is socially constructed, of course, but I would argue without necessarily incorporating the powerful political and economic interests that imbue ‘impact’.

‘much educational research to be burdened by a pursuit of theory that is inappropriate to the circumstances’ (p.557):

But will the work have the spark of critical and innovative thinking that will make it shine and give it true impact?... [The] answer will often be ‘No’. (p.558)

We therefore need to ‘reduce our dependence on established orthodoxies and pseudo-theories’ (p.558). Indeed, the ‘keystone elements’ of ‘most definitions of theory’ are held to be ‘generalization, explanation and prediction’ (p.558). Once again, despite a range of caveats and Gardner’s own concession that his view ‘may not be popular’ (p.558), a series of charges are levelled, apparently at non-positivist research, although it remains unclear exactly who or what is being targeted. He acknowledges that:

Some may agree with me and some may disagree. This is entirely healthy. It reflects a community that is not content to have a single worldview but flourishes in debate and change. (p.544)

This paper, then, seeks to contribute to the debate Gardner has raised. There is in his address an element of reprise of the ‘paradigm wars’ launched by Hillage *et al.* (1998), Tooley and Darby (1998) over a decade ago. Others have responded amply to the attempted imposition of this ‘new orthodoxy’, refuting the notion of atheoretical research, and defending pluralism within the educational research community (for a robust example, see Hodkinson, 2004). I do not intend to re-engage with those particular debates here. What I do wish to argue is that the matter of ‘impact’ cannot be reduced to the simple propositions advanced by Gardner, and that in order to understand ‘impact’ (and the impact of ‘impact’) more deeply, not only theory but radical social theory is essential.

Such an approach demands a reflexive sociology which can extend radical doubt to problematise the myriad preconstructed ideas – ‘impact’ being but one example – that surround us and order our practices in socially regulated ways: a sociology of social science itself, such as that advanced by Pierre Bourdieu (e.g. Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). This calls for the systematic critique of ‘reasonable expectations’ held by powerful social groups, especially when they seek to constrain the nature of educational inquiry; and for research that is relevant precisely *because* it disturbs expectations and engages in political struggle against the social injustices which are currently being intensified by policy-makers in the UK and around the world.

The first section of this paper, then, reviews current debates about the research ‘impact’ agenda. The second outlines Bourdieu’s theoretical framework, and his concept of *illusio*, as a framework with potential for offering critical insight into that agenda. The third and fourth sections give an account of research I conducted with colleagues about the youth support service Connexions, illustrating the application of *illusio* to generate deeper understandings of practitioners’ experiences; and of its reception by key audiences identified by HEFCE and the research councils as targets for ‘impact’. The last main section analyses this narrative of ‘impact’ also through a Bourdieusian theoretical lens applying the concept of *illusio*, before ending with some brief reflexive conclusions about the impact of ‘impact’ and the responses educational researchers and their representative scholarly bodies might make.

The debate about ‘impact’

There has been widespread debate in the media and internet among academics about the introduction of ‘impact’ into Research Council criteria, now also emerging in academic journals. There is strong support for the ‘impact’ agenda, as in Gardner’s (2011) presidential address. The argument tends to be posed in the following way: how can any academic reasonably object to an expectation that their research will have a positive impact on society and that they should be able to demonstrate this – especially when it is funded by public money? Some persuasive arguments are presented by nursing professor Brendan McCormack (2011), who advances a theory of ‘engaged scholarship’ that demands commitment on the part of both researchers *and* users to ‘integrate the doing and using of research in practice’ (p.111). He views the impetus from HEFCE as positive opportunity to maximise such engagement.

However, there is also strong opposition to this agenda (see for example Brooks, 2011; Fazackerly, 2012, with subsequent reader comments running to almost 20 pages). McKibbin, an Oxford don and social historian writing in the *London Review of Books*, states bluntly that ‘There is everything wrong with Hefce’s [*sic*] notion of impact’ (p.3), and shows that rhetorical claims of breadth of definition for ‘impact’ are not backed up by the rest of their documentation on REF criteria. He describes the REF as ‘a bureaucratic machine running out of control’ (p.6); and argues that in fact the main purposes of the ‘impact’ agenda are to ‘establish tighter political control of the universities’ (p.6) and further their creeping privatisation.

It is notable that such opposition comes not only from the ‘soft’ disciplines such as arts, humanities and social sciences, but also from the ‘hard’ disciplines of science and technology. Parker and Teijlingen (2012) write as professors of social work, acknowledging that applied research in their field should indeed contribute to the enhancement of well-being and the improvement of services. They nevertheless point out the considerable difficulties – time-consuming, costly and possibly impracticable – of demonstrating such impact. More significantly, they argue that theoretical and philosophical research also play a vital role in this field, but are placed under threat by the ‘impact’ agenda:

It must be remembered, however, that [the requirement to demonstrate ‘impact’] *is ideologically driven*, associating research with a tangible outcome perhaps rather than simply increased knowledge and understanding. It may seem, on the surface, important and a victory for common sense (whoever determines this), but it promotes one specific view of research only. [...] [Should] outcome-focused research be the only type supported, the sector is likely to lose those deeper understandings and meanings that have developed and now permeate practice. Indeed, it may be that such theoretical research has engendered practice cultures that have positively changed lives. (Parker and Teijlingen, 2012: 43-44, emphasis added)

In particular, they warn that it would be dangerous for ‘conceptual, theoretical and critical “thorn-in-the-side” research to be marginalised or suppressed (p.48).

This latter concern is echoed by Brown (2010), who points to:

...the tension between participatory or critical research and ‘pragmatism’ that restricts the types of question asked, prefers surface description and evaluation to ‘what is really going on’, has a superficial quasi-quantitative view of qualitative data gathering and analysis, and avoids engaging in the political contested nature of research. (p.245, citing Trinder, 1996)

Indeed, Reisz (2010), reporting a seminar for participants in the REF ‘impact’ pilot, noted claims that some universities were reluctant to submit research that was ‘controversial or critical of government’ (p.6), even where it had had demonstrable impact.

These critiques are deepened by Oxford University ethnographers Mills and Ratcliffe (2012), who argue that social research has become colonised by the ‘cultural circuits’ of capitalism (citing Thrift, 2005). Models of academic production have been increasingly shaped by business theory (see also McKibbin, 2010), and the demand for ‘impact’ as a measurement of the economic value of research has a number of consequences:

The push for efficiency within the circuit potentially squeezes the unpredictable, the tangential and the creative. [...] Increasingly the public and the market are seen as the best arbiters of useful knowledge, via new structures that offer proxies of quality and status, such as citation indexes and university rankings. One might argue that this leads to a crisis of academic community and audience. Academic work is less engaged with intellectually, even as it circulates more widely. [...] [T]hese new circuits discourage a sustained investment of thought or time by academics. They favour intellectual dexterity, quick responses to emergent funding opportunities and intellectual multi-tasking. The premium placed on planned and programmed deliverables is reworking older scholastic horizons. Academic time is increasingly defined by Gantt charts [...] rather than long-term speculative research. It is a productivity focused on predictability. (Mills and Ratcliffe, 2012: 152)

Their argument once again implies that it is critical research that may become excluded from the field – research which may not ‘chime’ comfortably with powerful research-users’ expectations. It also goes some way to answering Parker and Teijlingen’s (2012) question about who determines the ‘common sense’ that is supposed to prevail in the ‘impact’ agenda. As McKibbin notes, ‘The assessment of impact will be made by panels the “majority” of whose members will come from the “user community”’ (2010: 3); at the same time, he questions sharply how certain of these users might assess research that is not to their political liking or supportive of their own business interests.

In order to offer further critical insights into this debate, I turn next to outline some key elements of Bourdieu’s radical social theory which can be usefully applied.

Bourdieu’s sociology

In one respect, Bourdieu may share common ground with presidential address by Gardner (2011) that we began with. Bourdieu was vehemently opposed to abstract theoreticism, to theory-for-theory’s-sake, divorced from the concrete realities of everyday lives, and from the empirical data through which we can understand those lives. However, he was equally vehemently opposed to methodological technicism and sectarianism, and to the ‘scientific myopia’ which arises from unthinking reliance on research instruments and ‘absence of theoretical vision’ (Wacquant, 1992: 28).

Instead of a continued separation between [...] two poles mitigated only by intensified interaction, Bourdieu advocates the *fusion* of theoretical construction and practical research operations. (Wacquant, 1992: 34).

Bourdieu was also emphatic about the necessity for researchers to grapple with the complexities of social life, and to engage in unsettling political critique. This poses him in some opposition to Gardner's call for simple propositions chiming with the expectations and desires of dominant social groups. As Wacquant (1992) explains, complex though it may render our research, we have to take seriously the organic and relational nature of Bourdieu's sociology, and its core principle of dissolving entrenched binaries of subject/object, structure/agency, and micro/macro-level analysis. Otherwise, there is a strong danger, seen especially in Anglophone work, of fragmenting and therefore misreading and de-radicalising Bourdieu's oeuvre. This is particularly noticeable with regard to his concepts of social and cultural capital and of *habitus*, with the latter all too often used to 'bestow[] gravitas without doing any theoretical work' (Reay, 2004).

It is impossible to undertake within the remit of this paper a comprehensive review of Bourdieu's sociology (see e.g. Rawolle and Lingard, in press; Grenfell, 2008, for fuller accounts). Here, then, I focus on the conceptual 'thinking tools' most fundamental to his theory-as-method, those of *habitus* and field, and on the notion of *illusio* or 'interest'. This latter concept has been largely neglected and sometimes misused in the application of Bourdieu's sociology (Costey, 2005), and has rarely been applied in educational research. Widin's study of international English language education projects (2010) is the only educational example that utilises it centrally, in her analysis of neo-colonial domination and subordination in such projects. Yet it is an essential tool in Bourdieu's thinking, since (in his later work at least) it is the primary way in which he expresses the interaction of *habitus* and field (Costey, 2005; Wacquant, 1992). Inevitably, for heuristic reasons, I leave aside other important concepts such as symbolic capitals, which themselves contribute to the organic whole of this theoretical framework, risking the danger of which I have already warned by this omission. However, I would argue that the case I do make would be the richer for, rather than contradicted by, their inclusion.

Reay (2004) offers a succinct account of *habitus* as a multi-layered nexus of human dispositions and pre-dispositions, drawing out its various characteristics: its social and embodied nature, entailing both thought and feeling; its operation as agency, though bounded; its collective nature, shaped by classed, gendered and racialised histories; and the interplay of past and present in both its durability and its permeability:

...habitus can be viewed as a complex internalized core from which everyday experiences emanate. Choice is at the heart of habitus, which he likens to 'the art of inventing' (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 55), but at the same time the choices inscribed in the habitus are limited. I envisage habitus as a deep, interior, epicentre containing many matrices. These matrices demarcate the extent of choices available to any one individual. (Reay, 2004: 435)

As such, *habitus* entails both structure *and* agency, both objective and subjective aspects of our experience. Its theoretical counterpart is the concept of 'field', inseparable as the 'other side of the coin' of *habitus*. Wacquant emphasises this interdependence of the two concepts:

...both of [Bourdieu's] key concepts of *habitus* and *field* designate bundles of relations. A field consists of a set of objective historical relations between positions anchored in certain forms of power (or capital), while *habitus* consists of a set of historical relations 'deposited' within individual bodies in the form of mental and corporeal schemata of perception, appreciation and action. (1992: 16, original emphasis)

Yet even this particular definition of the conceptual pairing, taken alone, can lead to a widespread misunderstanding of their relationship. All too often, *habitus* is taken to focus on the subjective, human element, whilst *field* is taken to focus on the objective, structural context in which human experience and action are located (see, for example, Grenfell and James, 1998: 15). This can risk re-dichotomising *habitus* and practice from fields and capital, and mistaking objective relations between *positions* – that is to say, sets of *social* relations – as objective relations between *things* (e.g. Rawolle and Lingard, in press). Imperfect as it is by Bourdieu's own admission, his use of the metaphor of a game to illuminate what he means by 'field' is crucial to understanding that this frequent misinterpretation, which tends to treat *habitus* as agency (however constrained) and *field* as structure, is incorrect. A field is not only a set of given external conditions which have themselves been *socially* devised or imposed - like the rules and the pitch or court in soccer or tennis – but is also the agentic and partly subjective *playing* of the game through our *habitus*. The field, as 'a space of conflict and competition' (Wacquant, 1992: 17), is constructed only through the human doings of human beings.

It is not only difficult to keep hold of this essentially dialectical relationship between *habitus* and *field*, with both concepts expressing structure as well as agency (Golsorkhi *et al.*, 2009); it is also difficult to grasp precisely the articulation between them, as Warde (2004) notes. He argues that a return to the concept of practice in Bourdieu's earlier work is necessary, but in doing so he dismisses a pivotal concept in Bourdieu's later work which I believe does elucidate their interaction: that of 'interest' or *illusio*.

Bourdieu's concept of *illusio*: articulating *habitus* and *field*

For Bourdieu, the field-as-game operates not so much according to explicit rules as tacit 'regularities'. Within the game, players use their capital and strategies to make moves, take positions, seek to position others, play to win, and/or play to transform the game and its immanent rules:

Thus we have *stakes* (*enjeux*) which are for the most part the product of the competition between players. We have an *investment in the game*, *illusio* (from *ludus*, the game): players are taken in by the game, they oppose one another, sometimes with ferocity, only to the extent that they concur in their belief (*doxa*) in the game and its stakes; they grant these a recognition that escapes questioning. Players agree, by the mere fact of playing, and not by way of a 'contract,' that the game is worth playing, that it is 'worth the candle,' and that this *collusion* is the very basis of their competition. (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 98, original emphases)

The concept of *illusio* is therefore quite distinct from that of 'illusion' (Costey, 2005). *Habitus* socialises people to feel their *illusio* simply as 'acting sensibly' (Bourdieu, 1992a: 66). As with the concept of practice, which Bourdieu argues is *not* largely intentional, utilitarian or a matter of choice

but rather an instinctive sensibility, so also he views *illusio* as part of a deeply somatized feel for the game, although perhaps somewhat closer to awareness than our more unconscious immersion in the *doxa* of the field (Wacquant, 1992). Widin (2010) alerts us to three key aspects of how *illusio* plays out. First, not only do different groups orient themselves to different interests to the field, but the interests of some will dominate others. Second, dominant groups tend to hide their interests beneath a ‘disavowal of interest’. Third, it is therefore necessary to discern the *actual* stakes that apparently disinterested players are pursuing, beyond their rhetorical declarations about the objects they value.

What is at stake for *illusio* is constituted by those objects that are considered of value in the field; typically, these may take the form of the various capitals – social, cultural and economic – that can be accumulated, circulated and exchanged. But investment in a game like education or educational research may also be an investment in ‘hidden, non-material profits’ (Wacquant, 1992: 26) such as values and broader social purposes: all the more reason for probing beneath apparent ‘disinterest’. Changes in a field driven by powerful groups therefore often entail changes to its stakes, devaluing those pursued by subordinate groups (Bourdieu, 1984). This is in part effected through ‘officializing strategies’ which aim to engender regularity of practice. The object of such strategies is to ‘transmute “egoistic”, private, particular interests... into disinterested, collective, publicly avowable, legitimate interests’ (Bourdieu, 1977: 40). At the same time:

The sense of good investment [...] dictates a withdrawal from outmoded, or simply devalued, objects, places or practices and a move into ever newer objects in an endless drive for novelty... (Bourdieu, 1984: 249)

This process serves to marginalise and denigrate anyone who fails to identify with the new ‘general interest’ that has been manufactured as the only reasonable one, reducing dissidents to mere individuals and making them appear *unreasonable*.

Bourdieu associates this process with fetishism (Wacquant, 1992), in the Marxist sense of that word: an extreme form of reified thinking which represents an object’s attributes as natural and intrinsic whilst obscuring the social relations which underpin its production and are reproduced through its functioning (Allman, 2007). As Harvey explains the fetish (2010), what we produce socially becomes hidden within a cipher which then takes on the status of a ‘fact of nature’ (p. 41). ‘[W]e are perpetually at risk of being ruled by fetishistic constructs that blind us to what is actually happening...’ (p.47), but Harvey emphasises (as does Bourdieu) that this is not a mere illusion: ‘the surface appearance, while fetishistic, always indicates an objective reality’ (p.46). Fetishism de-historicises social practices, abstracts the political from the material, fragments related phenomena, and obscures the social nature of human relations (Carpenter, 2011). Dominant interests imposed on the field, then, cloaked as ‘reasonable’ interests, and demanding the investment of *illusio* by all, can be seen as a prime example of the fetish.

The injustice of such changes to the field is compounded by the ‘hysteresis’ of *habitus* – similar to Marx’s notion that consciousness lags behind reality. Bourdieu (1984: 142) argues that this hysteresis causes ‘previously appropriate categories of perception and appreciation’ to be inappropriately applied to the new state of the field; and that this effect is worse for groups occupying disadvantaged positions. The holders of devalued ‘goods’ thus have their position worsened by continuing to ascribe value to them, but this is not an entirely pessimistic situation:

These phenomena of individual and collective misrecognition are in no way illusory, since they can orient real practices, especially the individual and collective strategies aimed at establishing or re-establishing the objective reality of the value of the [goods], and these strategies can make a real contribution toward actual revaluation. (Bourdieu, 1984: 143)

Indeed, though inability (for whatever reason) to invest one's *illusio* in the dominant stakes engenders a lack of fit between *habitus* and field, leading to alienation and exclusion, it may also create a far clearer perception of the game and its rules by virtue of that rupture (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 173). This offers some hope of collective resistance and struggle.

Having worked with Bourdieusian theory in educational research for some time, my attention was only drawn to the significance of the concept of *illusio* recently by one of my doctoral students, Frédérique Guéry, who had encountered its more frequent use in the new critical studies of translation and interpreting (e.g. Inghilleri, 2005). As I was trying to make sense of the data from a project funded by the ESRC about the shifting roles, identities and practices of youth support workers in the now-defunct Connexions Service, and she was studying the emergence of public service interpreting as a fragile new profession, we found ourselves looking at common issues experienced by both groups of practitioners: the difficulties of workplace learning in a context of severely inadequate resources, and the emotional and ethical pressures under which they laboured. A sense of dislocation and disillusionment with the fields in which they were employed led us to work with the concept of *illusio* in our analyses, and enabled us to situate the deep personal crises arising for some practitioners in a much broader, social understanding of what was happening. I go on next, then, to give an abbreviated account of the project on youth support workers, which has been reported in depth elsewhere (Colley, Lewin and Chadderton, 2010a; Lewin and Colley, 2011; Chadderton and Colley, 2012; and Colley, 2012), to illustrate the application of *illusio* in its analysis (for an extended version, see Colley, 2012), before discussing the 'impact' of the project and interpreting it through the same theoretical lens.

Youth support workers: a case of shattered *illusio*

In exploring 'career histories' through narrative interviews with 26 youth support workers who had different lengths of experience in Connexions, and with some who had quit the service because of their disagreements with its implementation, our research was undertaken in a context of repeated infrastructural change over the previous 15 years. Indeed, unprecedented upheaval had occurred with the formation of the national multi-professional Connexions Service in 2001 and its devolution to local authorities in 2008 – a move followed by the withdrawal of its funding entirely in 2010.

The newly-founded Connexions Service was promoted vigorously by the New Labour government as 'the best start in life for every young person' (DfEE, 2000) and as a 'holistic' one-stop-shop dedicated to supporting the most disadvantaged youth through long-term trusting relationships with their own Personal Adviser, as well as continuing to offer universal career advice and guidance to all young people. Many of the practitioners we interviewed talk about their commitment to these ideals: it was a 'stake' in which they had been enthusiastic to invest their *illusio*. But whether 'old hands' or relatively new recruits, almost all felt thoroughly disillusioned by their experiences by the time we conducted our fieldwork in 2008, and we were inundated with volunteers responding to a request for a small number of research participants prepared to talk about why they had left the service.

There were several main reasons for this disillusionment. The first related to a severe lack of resources: at best, only around half the number of staff promised by the government were ever recruited. As a result, Personal Advisers (PAs) had excessively large caseloads, lowering the quality of their work, deskilling them through lack of time for professional development, and – perhaps most significantly – forcing them to make choices about which young people they could work with, and which they had to neglect, as they simply could not see them all. In addition to this, they felt under strong pressure by their managers, themselves responding to government targets, to act in ways they considered wholly unethical. As the main target for Connexions' funding was to remove as many young people as possible from the 'NEET' category (not in employment, education or training), PAs were pressured to *avoid* spending time with youth facing the greatest difficulties, and who were therefore unlikely to enter or sustain a placement in education, training or employment. Instead, they were told to concentrate on young people more likely to move out of 'NEET' status in the short term. In addition, they were also pressurised to submit clients to whatever opportunities were available, regardless of their vocational appropriateness, in order to get them off the 'NEET' register. Others were obliged to engage in 'creative accounting' measures to demonstrate that unfeasible targets had in fact been met. This result in a great deal of emotional labour and ethics work (Colley, 2012) for them.

Most of the PAs we talked to had attempted to protest about these pressures to their managers, but had been met at best with indifference, at worst with intimidation and denial, and, in a couple of cases, the termination of their contracts. Some of our respondents withdrew their data for fear of reprisals, despite our provisions to ensure confidentiality. A considerable number had become ill physically and /or mentally because of the conflicts they encountered in this situation. Some had left Connexions for health reasons, others because they were simply not prepared to tolerate the conflicts any longer. The disjuncture between the 'goods' they valued and the interests of government and managers became untenable. Their *illusio* was so shattered that they could no longer remain in the field. Our findings resonated strongly with those of Dejours (2009) and Pez  (2010) on contemporary workplaces in France. They argue that the pressures of 'hyperproductivity' (Pez , 2010) driven by economic competition, alongside pressures to behave unethically in contexts of restricted resources, are creating intense social and psychological dislocation for employees; but that voices raised against these trends within the workplace are routinely met with denial, 'institutional lies' and the threat of dismissal from their jobs (Dejours, 2009).

Continuing to read this data through the theoretical lens of *illusio*, we can see how the government promoted Connexions in a 'disinterested' way: its 'object of value' was supposed to be one of meeting the needs of all young people, especially the most disadvantaged, and doing so through a holistically caring service. Yet the government's *actual* rather than *rhetorical* interest could be seen as reducing public welfare spending in the interests of the most powerful players in the economic and political fields. First, it drastically reduced previous spending on career guidance, youth work and other youth support services through the under-funding and under-staffing of Connexions, disguising this as an inevitable 'fact of nature' in the prevailing economic situation. Second, by enforcing targets focused on 'NEET' reduction in this context, this *de facto* worked to exclude the neediest young people from access to services and support. The target of 'NEET' reduction became an 'officializing strategy', a fetish which acted to enforce particular practices and abstract young people and their status from the social and economic distress imposed on them. A third interest, one could argue, was to withdraw funding for such support altogether (as has now happened) whilst

simultaneously making it appear that young people and Connexions practitioners were to blame for the service's failures. Unable to overcome the hysteresis of *habitus* which continued to bind practitioners to an *illusio* of caring for young people, PAs engaged in largely individual strategies to protest and resist. But the power of the officialising strategy marginalised them, positioning them as unreasonable trouble-makers or 'dead wood' incapable of adapting to new (and supposedly better) approaches to youth support, and forcing significant numbers out of the field – with many others being forced out two years later by redundancy when funding was withdrawn altogether.

How, then, did we try to create impact for our research, and how were those efforts received? I begin with my own narrative of efforts to gain such impact.

Failure of 'impact' – or refusal of 'impact'?

Like many other researchers in applied social sciences (see, for example Parker and van Teijlingen, 2012; Grenfell and James, 2008), our research was strongly committed to user engagement and to making a positive impact in the field in which we were working. Key stakeholders were involved from the start in the development of the research proposal and design, and in the on-going work of the project, through an advisory group. Well-established networks among policy makers, implementers, practitioners and their trade unions were used to announce the launch of the project and to disseminate interim findings throughout and after its conduct, including a series of articles in a key practitioner journal (Colley *et al.*, 2008; Colley and Lewin, 2008; Colley *et al.*, 2010b), presentations at practitioner conferences, short briefings and working papers, and seminars aimed at those audiences.

Feedback of interim findings was provided to senior managers of the three case-study services with which we were working, which already demonstrated the problems encountered by PAs. The weight of the evidence we had was substantial. Not just the principle of academic freedom, but also our ethical obligations under BERA's own code of practice (BERA 2011) demanded that we did not withhold data that might be unpalatable. However, whilst one senior manager was very supportive of the research, and attempted (unsuccessfully) to use it to influence the restructuring of Connexions as it was devolved to that local authority, responses from the other two services were quite different. One service responded with a vigorous email protest about the feedback, but when we met to discuss this with them, they acknowledged the validity of the findings while expressing their disappointment about them. They also decided to withdraw some of their own data (we had also interviewed two senior managers in each of the three services) for fear of repercussions within the local authority, as their own posts were now under threat. From the third service, we received no reply or further communication from managers, despite attempts to follow up the interim report with them. The response from the practitioners who had participated was extremely enthusiastic. They expressed strong satisfaction that the realities of their work were being given a voice which they believed would have to be heard. A letter about the research published in the *Guardian* as well as articles in the practitioner journal brought more emails from other PAs nationally, and similar responses emerged in the dissemination seminars and conference presentations we held, welcoming our findings as resonant with their own experiences. I was also consulted by PAs in three other Connexions services and their trade unions, to help them produce documentation to support their struggles against downgrading and salary cuts, and later against redundancy. This support had

to remain confidential, however, as the PAs were forbidden by their services from making the details of local authority decisions on these matters public.

After completing the research, it was clear that Connexions was disintegrating as a service in the context of local authority austerity measures. As a marginal service, competing for funds now with more high-profile local authority agendas such as child protection, it took the brunt of initial cutbacks. This made the prospects somewhat bleak for achieving research ‘impact’ in the sense emphasised by Gardner (2011). Our research had not ‘chimed’ with the interests of policy makers and implementers, since it made visible the negative consequences of the Connexions strategy; and its recommendations for improving the service – and the prospects of the young people it was not serving well – fell on deaf ears. How could it possibly ‘chime’ with the change in their interests? How could those interests be arbitrated as ‘reasonable’ or otherwise without taking into account findings such as ours?

Nevertheless, we became more optimistic as an invitation came first from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to present our findings to policy leads and researchers in this area, which seemed to be warmly received; leading to a further invitation to present our findings as evidence to a newly-formed national commission looking at professional issues in this area of work. The latter was populated largely by senior managers and stakeholders across different sectors, including some senior figures in Connexions: that is to say, by people who were also implementing government policy and managing PAs.

Not surprisingly, then, we encountered considerable hostility as we presented our findings. Some of this hostility consisted of heated denials and declarations that such things did not go on in ‘their’ service (although classroom discussions in my teaching with students employed in one of the represented services suggested strongly that very similar things did go on). Some consisted of indignant attempts to brand the research participants as being unfit to practice. Some, predictably perhaps, consisted of attempts to denigrate the research through ill-informed attacks on its methodology (see Browne, 2010, and Goode, 2006 for similar accounts of this practice). Indeed, one opponent argued that our findings should not be accepted as evidence by the commission at all on this basis. In these respects, we found ourselves meeting the same response that the PAs participating in our research had recounted. Eventually, our research was listed as evidence in the commission’s report, but not cited within it – thus undermining any claim in ‘REF’ terms for ‘impact’.

Meanwhile, a change of government had taken place, the interested parties at the DfES had moved on, and Michael Gove, the education minister, had made it clear that resources would no longer be allocated by his new department to this area of work. At the same time, I continued to receive emails from practitioners still attempting to work in this field, or now conducting their own research, testifying to the positive personal impact the research had created for them by representing as a public issue what had so often been experienced by them only as private troubles (cf. Wright Mills, 1959/2000). Such subtle impact is, of course, almost impossible to quantify or to evidence (Parker and van Teijlingen, 2012). Moreover, the confidential nature of the support provided to trade unions defending PAs’ jobs and conditions meant that could not be made public. This places us thus in a disadvantaged position in the field of educational research, which now demands measures of ‘impact’ as an indication of the quality of our work.

This, then, is a narrative not of ‘impact’, nor of failure of ‘impact’, but of the *refusal of ‘impact’* by powerful players in the field we studied; and of its potential consequences in the field of educational research: the ways in which the quality of that work might be judged within the terms of the REF and of the Research Councils’ criteria for funding and assessing research. Here I leave aside the difficulties of achieving ‘impact’ in the disappearing field of youth support work, important though that is. Instead, I focus on analysing this refusal of ‘impact’ using Bourdieu’s theoretical tools, and *illusio* in particular, to interpret the fate of our work in the field of educational research.

Competing *illusios*² and the fetish of ‘impact’

Call me naïve (or indeed, old-fashioned), but from my initial entry into the field of educational research, I have always wanted my research to ‘make a difference’ to real lives. I believe that such differences can be made by educational researchers exposing and challenging the mechanisms by which social injustice is produced and reproduced, and by which symbolic and material violence is done to oppressed groups. To name these mechanisms and render them visible is a contribution I can make to struggles against them, from my current location within the academy. My research is therefore unashamedly critical, since it starts from a *prima facie* recognition that social inequalities are endemic in capitalist society, and is driven by values and purposes that seek a radical transformation of society to end such inequalities. This is my *illusio*, my passionate and committed investment in the field of educational research, which is inextricably linked to a lifetime *habitus* – mostly developed outside the academy – of socialist-feminist beliefs and activities.

This has not always been easy, but it has until now been possible for myself and many others committed to the same kind of *illusio* within the field of educational research. Clearly it did not ever fit the dominant *illusio*, which has long been the mantra of ‘what works’ (Hodkinson, 2008). But there was space in the field for such critical research, and I believe that it did have positive impact, although probably not easily measurable. The introduction of the ‘impact’ agenda by research councils and HEFCE, driven by government influence, represents a significant change in the field (cf. Grenfell and James, 1998) in terms of the stakes we have to play for: a change imposed by powerful social and economic groups. To be deemed to be doing ‘excellent research’, we now have to demonstrate excellent ‘impact’, albeit within a definition that is (as the contesting views reviewed above have shown) at one and the same time vague and narrowly rigid.

The imposition of ‘impact’ as a criterion of research quality can be understood as an ‘officializing strategy’ (Bourdieu, 1977) aimed at creating new regularities of practice. Those regularities require research to be conceived, developed, implemented and disseminated in line with the interests of ‘users’. But ‘users’ are not a homogenous group. The practitioners, young people, parents and communities affected by the decimation of Connexions had few if any interests in common with the local and national politicians denying the service resources and imposing inappropriate and unfeasible targets; nor with the senior and middle managers pressurising practitioners to engage in unethical behaviour in order to try and meet those inappropriate targets with inadequate resources. As Widin (2010) reminds us, different groups bring different and competing interests to their play in the field, and some dominate others. In this case, it is the same dominant groups – policy makers and implementers – that privileged their interests over service users’ interests who are also

² The grammatically correct plural of *illusio* is *illusiones*, but I have opted for a less grammatical form in order to avoid conflating it with the English term ‘illusions’.

appropriating the right to decide which interests are ‘reasonable’ for our research to ‘chime’ with, and which are not. Thus the object of the ‘officialising strategy’ of ‘impact’ is to transform the particular interests of these dominant groups into legitimate and generalised interests which appear to be the only reasonable ones. This is at the same time accompanied by a disavowal of interest (Widin, 2010), the appearance of *disinterestedness* (Bourdieu, 1977), and the obfuscation of actual interests through the appeal to ‘common sense’ and the public good. Being in favour of ‘impact’ is thus constructed as akin to voting for good and against evil. How could anyone not agree?

But as public debates about ‘impact’ have revealed, some interpret these ‘disinterested’ interests as the creeping privatisation of higher education, others as the silencing of critical voices, yet others as a broader political attack on public intellectuals. I have heard colleagues express the view that a major aim of the REF, including the ‘impact’ criterion, is not to enhance the quality of research, but in fact to justify the further restriction of research funding whilst ensuring that what remains is concentrated in a small number of elite institutions. Should these interpretations be even partially justified, we are facing a radical rupture in our field.

As we encountered in the hostile reception of our research by the government commission and senior managers of Connexions, the corollary of this move by powerful players is to marginalise and disparage those who do not agree; who continue to play by the old rules, in which oppositional research was subordinate but tolerated; and who cling to an *illusio* now rendered illegitimate within the field (Bourdieu, 1984). Our *habitus* finds itself beset by ‘hysteresis’, lagging behind the times, increasingly out of kilter with the new stakes in the field, and our already-marginal goods are further devalued (Bourdieu, 1984). But the durable aspects of my *habitus* refuse to be transposed (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) in line with the ‘endless drive’ for ‘ever newer objects’ of value (Bourdieu, 1984: 249) in the educational research field. My choices are limited by the actions of other, more powerful players in the field, and also by the pale of my own *habitus* (cf. Reay, 2004).

To complete this analysis, I argue that ‘impact’ – as constructed by the government, its paymasters, and its servants (the research councils and HEFCE) – far from being a reasonable requirement that no excellent researcher could refuse, in fact constitutes a classic example of the fetish. The official discourse of ‘impact’ reifies its validity as a criterion for judging research, portraying it as natural, intrinsic and unquestionable. At the same time, it serves to obscure the hierarchical social relations which exist within the field of higher education, between Russell Group, ‘red brick’ and post-1992 universities, between conformative and critical researchers, and (outside the academy) between different groups of research users. It pretends that the allocation of research resources have nothing to do with the vested interests of political, economic and academic elites. It de-historicises our understanding of the direction that research funding policy is taking, and attempts to divorce it from the far wider influence of neo-liberal policies at a time of global economic crisis. As Bourdieu and Wacquant note, the constitution of such a fetish is ‘the properly social magic of institutions’ (1992: 117).

A reflexive conclusion

For Bourdieu, reflexivity is perhaps the most crucial element of social science; not a narcissistic reflexivity, but one in which social scientists are obliged to question the rules of the game they themselves are playing as they construct it, and constructing as they play it. It is the application of ‘radical doubt’ to the core endeavours of the academy (Bourdieu, 1992b). It demands critical

scrutiny of the interests avowed by the leadership of the educational research community, and promoted on behalf of our learned society, BERA. And it questions any easy conformity with the imposition of new stakes and the reinforcement thereby of powerful and inequitable interests in our field.

There is, of course, also an obligation to individual reflexivity. In this paper, I have displayed some of my own 'dirty linen'. My account of trying to create impact with my research, and of finding its 'impact' refused by powerful opponents, could be read in quite a different way. It could be held up as evidence of the poor quality of my research itself; or of my efforts to disseminate it. Questions could be asked about how I might have got a better hearing for the research, engaged key stakeholders more positively, tried harder, done 'what works'. There is, in my story, a risk of 'caught-between-ness' or 'caught-out-ness', an awareness of my lack of 'the sense of a good investment which dictates a withdrawal from outmoded, or simply devalued objects, places or practices...' (Bourdieu, 1984: 249). In mitigation, therefore, I want to end my presentation with a passage quoted in Rawolle and Lingard (in press), and to hope that its final prediction proves correct:

A research presentation is in every respect the very opposite of an exhibition, of a *show* in which you seek to show off and to impress others. It is a discourse in which you *expose yourself*, you take risks. ... The more you expose yourself, the greater your chances of benefiting from the discussion and the more constructive and good-willed, I am sure, the criticisms and advice you will receive. (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.219, original emphases)

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