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What (a) to do about 'impact': a Bourdieusian critique

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Abstract: This paper presents a research-based, theoretically-informed contribution to the debate on 'impact' in educational research, and specifically a response to Gardner's presidential address to the British Educational Research Association (2011). It begins by discussing the development of the research 'impact' agenda as a global phenomenon, and reviews the current state of debate about 'impact' in the UK's Research Excellence Framework. It goes on to argue that a radical alternative perspective on this agenda is needed, and outlines Bourdieu's sociology – including his much-neglected concept of *illusio* – as offering potential for generating critical insights into demands for 'impact'. The term *illusio* in particular calls us to examine the 'stakes' that matter in the field of educational research: the objects of value that elicit commitment from players and are 'worth the candle'. This framework is then applied first to analyse an account of how an ESRC-funded project that I led was received by different research 'users' as we sought to generate impact for our findings. Second, it is used to show that the field of educational research has changed; that it has bifurcated between the field of research production and that of research reception; and that the former is being subordinated to the latter. The paper concludes by arguing that, despite many educational researchers' commitments to 'make a difference' in wider society, the research 'impact' imperative is one that encroaches on academic freedom; and that academics need to find collective ways in which to resist it.

Keywords: research impact; Research Excellence Framework; Bourdieu; *illusio*; academic freedom.

A to-do about 'impact'?

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' [2] to show 'value for money' (ESRC, 2009; HEFCE, 2011). In particular, this has been expressed through the inclusion of 'impact' as a key indicator – 20% of the grade awarded – in the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF), the 5-yearly audit of research quality in British universities. 'Impact' is defined by the REF guidelines as 'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia' generated by excellent research (HEFCE, 2012, p.48). Experts 'with professional experience of making use of, applying or benefiting from academic research' will be appointed to REF panels, including through nominations from 'appropriate bodies', specifically to assess 'impact' (HEFCE, 2012, p.5).

In his presidential address to the annual conference of the British Educational Research Association, 'What (a) to do about impact', John Gardner (2011) presented his response to this situation, focusing on how the 'impact' of our work might be improved. Despite 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). Gardner cites the government's dismissal of the Cambridge Primary Review as an example of 'political idealism' as clearly unreasonable, but 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 '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. His clear implication is that there has been an unreasonable 'to-do' of resistance to the demand for 'impact', and that educational researchers need instead to focus on 'what to do' in order to achieve it. Nevertheless, 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)

In this paper, then, I seek to contribute to such healthy debate on these issues by offering a counter-perspective. The first two sections of the paper outline the development of the research 'impact' agenda, over time and internationally, and review current debates about it in the UK. The third section argues that this calls for a radical alternative perspective, and I outline Bourdieu's theoretical approach – and in particular his much-neglected concept of *illusio* – as having potential for generating critical insight into that agenda. In the fourth section, I give a brief account of some research that I led, about youth support workers in the (now-defunct) Connexions service, and of its reception by key 'research user' in our efforts to generate impact for the findings. The last main section analyses this narrative of 'impact' by applying Bourdieu's sociology; and the paper ends with some conclusions about the impact of 'impact', and the responses educational researchers and their scholarly bodies might make.

The paper therefore goes beyond the short 'opinion' pieces which have largely been the vehicles for this debate on impact in educational research. It reviews the international relevance of these issues, as the measurement of 'impact' becomes central to research assessment and funding in ever more countries. It offers originality in drawing on an empirical experience of trying to create impact for a specific research project. It also raises critical questions about 'impact' barely addressed in the small number of substantial academic articles on the topic so far; and it seeks to do this through the innovative application of Bourdieu's concept of *illusio*.

Something old, something new, something borrowed...

It is important first of all to note that the 'impact agenda' is not a purely national one restricted to the confines of BERA and the UK. Although it has been expressed in different forms, this is a global trend:

The demand for effective evaluation tools to inform decisions on research funding and impacts has increased in line with public investments in R&D and innovation as countries try to enhance competitiveness and improve innovation capacity. (OECD, 2010, p.98)

As Seddon *et al.* (2012) note, this 'travelling reform' (p.16) is related to global shifts in the governance of education as a discipline, linked to the drive for managerialist audit and accountability. (The problematics of this broader shift in the relationship between policy and research, and between national and global processes therein, has been comprehensively reviewed by Lingard [in press]).

Some models focus largely on metric measures of academic impact such as citation rates and journal impact factors (a model which was considered for the UK REF, but rejected in the face of controversy about methodology and fairness). This metric approach is used in the 'Excellence in Research for Australia' (ERA) audit framework alongside an element of peer review (Australian Research Council, 2011). Similarly in Italy, the National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes (ANVUR) was established by Presidential Decree in 2010 within the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research, to monitor the quality of research outputs through metric assessment (ANVUR, 2012). Moreover, many Italian universities are also using ANVUR's criteria in decisions about allocating staff and financial resources to research (OECD, 2010): individuals wishing to apply for promotion within their institution to associate professor or above must submit their publications to ANVUR for assessment. For promotion to be approved, the applicant's ANVUR results must exceed the median value of all full professors in the same subject area, and ANVUR may choose to strengthen (but not weaken) the criteria applied.

However, a different model measuring 'impact' among end-users has also developed strongly in recent years, although this is not in itself entirely new. It has long been central to judgements about research and its funding in the US (see, for example, Kostoff, 1992), where it has been intensified in education by policies such as 'No Child Left Behind'. Even earlier, it appears in agendas dating back to the 1970s as research 'utilisation', 'utility' or 'value', or as knowledge 'mobilisation', 'enterprise', or 'transfer' (Lingard, in press). In Australia, in the early 2000s, a coalition government proposal to introduce the Research Quality Framework (RQF), similar to the UK model of national research audit, included measurement of 'community impact' in much the same terms as the REF (see Gale and Wright, 2008). The demand for 'value-for-money' accountability for publicly-funded research, in terms of demonstrable economic, environmental and social benefits, was explicit. Moreover, as in the forthcoming REF, 'research users' were to be included in panels assessing 'impact'. Although this approach was abandoned in favour of the ERA by Australia's incoming Labour government in 2007, other countries developing similar models to that of the UK include Belgium, Denmark, Finland, New Zealand and Switzerland (OECD, 2010).

There is also something older and borrowed in the underlying assumptions about excellence in research which underpin Gardner's address and this broader trend. One can see an element of

reprise of the 'paradigm wars' launched by Hillage *et al.* (1998) and by Tooley and Darby (1998) over a decade ago, in which qualitative social science, especially within critical, interpretive and post-structural research paradigms, was subjected to harsh criticism – indeed, in some cases, blatant ridicule – for its supposed unreliability and irrelevance in contrast with quantitative and positivist methodologies. Such arguments contribute to perceptions that the 'gold-standard' of research methods is the randomised controlled trial, and that, as Gardner asserts, the purpose of research is to allow the most precise prediction and control possible. Indeed, one impact of policy on research has been the privileging of particular methodologies and an unwillingness to fund others (Lingard, *in press*; Ozga *et al.*, 2006).

Others have responded to the attempted imposition of this 'new orthodoxy', refuting the notion of atheoretical research, and defending pluralism within the educational research community (for robust examples from different perspectives, see Hodkinson, 2004, 2008; Pawson, 2002). I do not intend to re-engage with those particular debates here, although I believe that they run from the same stable as that on 'impact'. Nor is it possible within the limits of this paper to address broader debates on the relationship between research, policy and practice (though I have discussed this elsewhere: see Colley, 2005). What I do wish to argue is that the matter of judging the quality of research by its 'impact' cannot be reduced to the simple propositions advanced by Gardner; that the 'impact' agenda is problematic in a number of ways, but especially with regard to its implications for research that is critical of government and other powerful stakeholders; and that in order to understand 'impact' (and the impact of 'impact') more deeply, not only theory but radical social theory is needed. I turn next, then, to review the way in which the 'impact' debate has been taken up in the UK so far.

The UK debate about 'impact': the case in favour

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 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 researchers 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, although Shaw (2011) in response suggests that this is not the sole responsibility of researchers, but also falls to healthcare organisations and practitioners: 'cultural and contextual changes may be needed to enable collaborative practice based research and development' (p.130), a point echoed by Dymock and Billet (2009) in the context of Australian research in vocational education and training.

Similar arguments have been advanced in UK educational research, particularly in the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP, 1999-2009), which funded 70 projects with over £48 million from HEFCE via the Economic and Social Research Council. This programme made claims to improve the quality of educational research in Britain following attacks such as those by Hillage, Tooley and others, and particularly to ensure that its projects were committed to engaging with policy-makers, stakeholders in education and the wider public, to improve teaching and learning (see Pollard, 2008, for a full presentation of the TLRP's strategy in this regard).

In a special issue of the *Cambridge Journal of Education* edited by John Gardner and TLRP Director Andrew Pollard (2008), a series of articles focuses on particular TLRP projects' efforts to create 'knowledge transformation and impact' (p.1). Project leaders from the Programme discuss the need to: combine excellence in the quality of the research with strong user engagement (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2008); make the language and presentation of research more user-friendly and user-responsive (Cordingley, 2008); and develop innovative and multi-perspective ways of

generating research-informed policy and practice (Daugherty, 2008; Nutley *et al.*, 2008). Interestingly, Gardner's own contribution to that collection (Gardner *et al.*, 2008) seems at some odds with the tenor of his presidential address to BERA. Although still critical of many education researchers' 'hackneyed' efforts at dissemination (p.92), and supportive of 'value-for-money' demands on publicly funded research, it also acknowledges that qualitative evidence and 'soft indicators' – often dismissed as 'anecdotal' – can nevertheless have validity and high relevance for policy-makers and implementers; that educational contexts are far too messy to allow for simplistic research or solutions; and that policy-makers (whether intentionally or not) can misuse research findings in ideologically distorted ways.

There is much in these discussions to which any educational researcher would aspire, myself included. Indeed, I believe that many of us in this field, which is essentially one of practice (Francis, 2010, 2011), are committed to ideals of bridging the theory-practice, academic-applied divide. But the difficulty is that these approaches may at the same time constitute a Bourdieusian *doxa*: it appears absurd to oppose them, yet at the same time, they may rest on both discourses and material realities which are deeply problematic. These are suggested, for example, by Francis' (2010, 2011) contribution to this debate from a position of working both inside and outside the traditional academy. She criticises educational researchers for having little influence in the UK; for not doing enough to engage with some of the most important forces determining the direction of education today, such as think-tanks, private (often multi-national) corporations, philanthropic organisations, and public pressure groups; and for acting as if 'oblivious to trends dominating wider educational practice – privatisation, teacher flexibilisation, new schools and school "ownership" – and to how their research might be "received" in these new contexts of practice' (2010, p.26). In this respect, her contribution seems to resonate with Gardner's call for research to 'chime' with the expectations of powerful groups who determine how education is to be shaped. At the same time, one could question this line of argument sharply, given evidence that many such think-tanks and philanthropic organisations represent elite and powerful groups with vested economic and political interests in controlling educational research and its outcomes (cf. Ball, 2012; Golsorkhi *et al.*, 2009; Monbiot, 2011, 2013).

Francis herself briefly notes some of the pragmatic difficulties in mobilising research-policy-practice engagement: the intensification of productivity in academia, limiting time available for such activities; the pressure from other criteria of research quality (including the REF itself) to prioritise publication of erudite, and therefore less accessible, papers in high-ranking peer-reviewed journals; and the difficult policy climate in England in particular, where researchers often complain that policy-makers are unwilling to listen to even the most robust findings. As Orland also suggests:

Even the most compelling and relevant research findings may fail to penetrate the policymaking process and, where research influences are manifest, their contributions are likely to be both indirect and incremental. (2009, p.155, cited in Lingard, in press)

Indeed, the HEFCE/ESRC-commissioned evaluation of the TLRP itself raises this same difficulty, and is decidedly cautionary about the Programme's focus on 'impact':

The portfolio of goals for educational research and development should remain diverse. Focusing on the development of 'interventions' and their rigorous evaluation can be a part - but far from the majority - of investment.

Fundamental scholarship about learning, teaching, measurement, and background knowledge is valuable in and of itself. Because most of the TLRP research was conducted in practical settings, some policymakers believe this research should be transformed immediately into an applied procedure. *On rare occasions this outcome may be possible.* (Baker *et al.*, n.d., p.4, emphasis added)

The final sentence in this quote is extremely telling. But how have others unpicked the more problematic assumptions underlying the arguments for research quality to be judged on its 'impact'?

Arguments against the 'impact' agenda

There has been strong opposition to this agenda, albeit largely expressed in the educational press: see for example Brooks, 2011, on removing references to the 'Big Society' from the delivery plan of the Arts and Humanities Research Council; and Fazackerly, 2012, on criticism of the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, 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' (2010, 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.

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 fear might be allayed by statements that research that is critical of public policies and organisational practices may still be regarded as leading to 'impact' (e.g. HEFCE, 2012, p.68). However, the REF 'impact' assessment criteria still largely assume that such 'impact' will result in *changes* to policy. This latter concern is echoed by Browne (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 (drawing on Thrift, 2005). Models of academic production have been increasingly shaped by business theory, 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. We might equally ask: which ‘users’ will be involved in these panels? From which ‘communities’? Who will decide their appointment, and how? And which political, social and economic interests will they represent?

There have been, however, virtually no such voices raised in opposition to the ‘impact’ agenda in the field of educational research in the UK. A short editorial comment in the *International Journal of Lifelong Education* (2010) asks questions about the actual types of ‘impact’ that will ‘count’, and the potential for downgrading critical research. Delamont (2010) and Saunders (2011) both contributed short opinion pieces to BERA’s news journal, *Research Intelligence*. The former focuses on the unpredictability of research utility, and the need for researchers to assert their own values about and definitions of the impact they seek to have. The latter argues that the somewhat violent notion of ‘impact’ is incompatible with a more subtle and diffuse – but no less powerful – notion of ‘influence’; and for research to inform practice, significant resources are required to effect personal and professional change.

Saunders’ position is noteworthy: she can hardly be cast as an ‘ivory tower’ academic, having worked for the General Teaching Council of England, and served as a ‘research-user’ member of the education panel in the REF’s predecessor, the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). She draws on Fielding’s ‘Hothead Article’ (2003) on ‘the impact of impact’, which takes a strongly critical stance. Although, by Fielding’s own admission, his is ‘not a fully researched paper’ (p.289), he argues that this is an extremely serious debate, since the language of ‘impact’ reflects the influence of an imposed performativity, a ‘new hegemony’ (p.294) that

valorises what is short-term, readily visible and easily measurable... has difficulty comprehending and valuing what is complex and problematic, what is uneven and unpredictable, what requires patience and tenacity... [and] finds difficulty in distinguishing between levels of change, between what is fairly superficial and what is, to coin another already over-used, increasingly presumptuous phrase ‘transformational’.... (p.289)

He therefore calls for more research-based and theorised contributions to these debates in educational research, an appeal to which this article responds. How, then, might we theorise this struggle over ‘impact’? And how might we theorise it in the context of the radical (neo-liberal) times in which we live and work? I will argue that to do so, we need to turn to radical social theory. I

suggest that Bourdieu's sociology - particularly his central, though largely neglected concept of *illusio* - offers us a useful framework for such an analysis.

Bourdieu's sociology: some 'thinking tools' for understanding 'impact'

In one respect, Bourdieu may share some common ground with Gardner's presidential address. 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 emphatic about the necessity for researchers to grapple with the complexities of social life, and to engage in unsettling political critique. Indeed, as I shall discuss more fully in the latter part of this paper, he believed that academics had a moral obligation to use their expertise to challenge publicly the invisible operation of domination in society (Golsorkhi *et al.*, 2009). This clearly poses him in opposition to Gardner's call for simple propositions that chime with the expectations and desires of dominant social groups.

It is impossible within the remit of this paper to undertake a comprehensive review of Bourdieu's sociology (though see, for example, Rawolle and Lingard, *in press*, and Grenfell, 2008a, 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 the notion of *illusio* or 'interest'. *Illusio* has been largely neglected in the application of Bourdieu's sociology to educational research (Widin, 2010 and Colley, 2012, are two exceptions). 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). In particular, it helps us understand 'how dominant actors can regulate and control a field' (Golsorkhi *et al.*, 2009, p.783).

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, p.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. 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*. In turn, this can lead to an incorrect interpretation of *habitus* as agency (albeit constrained) and field as structure. 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 avoiding this misconception. 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. It 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 the stakes still 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* (Grenfell, 2008b).

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. I argue, then, that it is 'worth the candle' to apply the concept of *illusio* to the fate of one of my own projects in terms of research 'impact', and that such an analysis can have a broad relevance to the debates about 'impact' reviewed above.

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

I have written extensively elsewhere with colleagues about a research project we conducted on the youth support service, its methodology and its findings (Colley, *et al.*, 2010a; Lewin and Colley, 2011; Chadderton and Colley, 2012; Colley, 2012; Colley, Henriksson, Niemeyer and Seddon, 2013). In brief, our key findings showed that:

- the government-funded youth support service had only employed about half the number of staff required, and funding was further cut after the final crisis hit the UK and the service devolved to local authorities;
- practitioners had excessively large caseloads and were being de-skilled;
- inappropriate government targets were set for reducing numbers of 'NEETs' (young people classed as 'not in employment, education or training');
- practitioners felt under considerable pressure from managers pursuing targets to engage in behaviour they considered deeply unethical;
- as a result, many had suffered physically and/or mentally illness;
- a number also lost their jobs, either quitting voluntarily because they felt their position was no longer tenable, or losing their contracts because of disciplinary actions.

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 youth support workers. 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 their service by their local authority, responses from the other two services were quite different. One service responded with a vigorous email protest about the feedback. 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 personal data 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 our attempts to follow up with them.

By contrast, 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 youth support workers 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 practitioners in three other local youth support services and their trade unions, to help them produce documentation to support them in struggles against downgrading and salary cuts, and later against redundancy. This support had to remain confidential, however, as they were expressly forbidden, under pain of dismissal, from making the details of local authority decisions on these matters known outside the service.

After completing the research, it was clear that the service was disintegrating nationally 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. Our research had not 'chimed' with the interests of policy makers and implementers, since it made visible the negative consequences of their strategy for the service; 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 the service: that is to say, by people who were also implementing government policy and managing practitioners.

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 such tactics). 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 practitioners 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 practitioners' 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. Although the REF assessment guidelines appear to make allowances for the handling of confidential material, this was no question of commercial confidentiality: when research users' livelihoods are at stake, they are understandably unwilling to take any risks that might expose them to sanctions.

This, then, is a narrative not of 'impact', nor of failure of 'impact', but of *a 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. One problem lies in the difficulties of achieving 'impact' in a disappearing field (youth support work), driven virtually out of existence by the pursuit of policies to cut public spending. But here, 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. We need to understand the nature of the changes wrought in our field. We also need to understand the ways in which new stakes have been introduced into our field, and the impact this has on researchers' *illusio*.

Understanding changes in the field(s) of research

Fields, according to much of Bourdieu's work, are typically characterised by a high degree of autonomy. However, as Deer (2003) has argued, the field of higher education in the UK (as well as in France) has suffered a constant erosion of its autonomy in recent decades, and is now significantly heteronomous, dominated by the fields of economy and politics. Gale and Wright (2008) similarly expose the loss of autonomy in Australian higher education, as does Butler (2006) in the US. Deer highlights a progression of key changes in the stakes of the field, from the abolition of academic tenure to the introduction of the RAE and regimes for inspecting the quality of teaching. To this we could add the introduction of the 'impact' criterion into the REF. But we also need to ask: what is the field of academic research? And who defines it?

In looking at the story of 'impact' from our project, one might argue that the 'impact' agenda has created a bifurcation in the field of research. We see on the one hand researchers involved in the field of *production* of research, and on the other, research 'users' involved in the field of *reception* of research (Lingard, personal comment). Our case reveals that the field of reception dominates the field of production. First, research 'users' are not an homogenous group: favourable 'users' of our research were severely marginalised within the field of reception, with little or no voice and influence, and no representation within official reckonings of 'impact'. The practitioners,

young people, parents and communities negatively affected by the decimation of youth support services have few interests in common with the local and national politicians denying resources to those services whilst imposing inappropriate and unfeasible targets upon them; 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.

Second, the field of reception (or rather, the dominant groupings within it) had the power to silence research findings – including findings which reveal these users' own culpability – and to denigrate researchers' work. The dominant receivers are likely to be the kinds of 'experts' from official bodies who will be appointed to REF panels. They are thereby given power through the REF to impose judgements about the quality of the field of production of research, judgements which themselves act as a form of production: producing a particular form of knowledge about the production of research. In this respect, Connell's comments resonate particularly strongly:

Knowledge is a social product not in a vague and metaphorical sense, but in hard and intrusive detail. What is known, by whom, about whom, with what effects – these are social, indeed, political questions. (1993, p.10, cited in Seddon *et al.*, 2012, p.109)

This knowledge, then, is likely to influence indirectly universities' future decisions about what research will be supported and presented as 'impactful'. In addition, dominant receivers' interests are increasingly central to decisions about research funding, further defining the rules and parameters of the field of production of research even before the point of production. Moreover, as Orland (2009, cited in Lingard, in press) notes, research tends to be received and mobilised by policy-makers to legitimate policy decisions that have already been made. This situation demonstrates a profound asymmetry of regulation and autonomy between researchers and 'users', and represents not only significant changes in the field (cf. Grenfell and James, 1998), but also the potential of this bifurcation for creating cross-field effects: the impact of research 'users' on research may be at least as important to analyse as the 'impact' of research on 'users' (cf. Lingard, in press).

Changing stakes and the impact on *illusio*

A key aspect of those changes is that a bureaucratic system, reified in the REF, is moving to change the stakes – the objects of interest – in the field of research production, whilst at the same time avowing *disinterest* through claims that the 'impact' agenda is solely acting for the public good (i.e. value-for-money use of public funds for research) (cf. Golsorkhi *et al.*, 2009; Widin, 2010). This is an 'officializing strategy' (Bourdieu, 1977) as discussed earlier, and any such change in the stakes of a field inevitably has an effect on the *illusio* of those in that 'game', demanding that their commitments shift. One choice for research producers is to embrace the change and 'play the game', adjusting one's *illusio* to that of research receivers. But this is not always possible. *Habitus*, and by association *illusio*, are durable, not least because they are deeply embodied.

My own *illusio* can be taken as an example. From my initial entry into the field of educational research, I have always wanted my research to 'make a difference' to real lives. I know that these commitments are shared by many other educational researchers, and I have learned a great deal from working alongside some of them. 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 – as it was done, to both practitioner and young people, in the youth support service discussed here. 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*, a 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. It profoundly influenced my work on youth support services, as it has done in all the other research I have conducted, and it led to the exposure of deeply iniquitous practices. For myself and for others, there has been space in the field of research production until recently to pursue such stakes and maintain our *illusio* as at least legitimate.

However, as we encountered in the hostile reception of our research by the government commission and senior managers of youth support services, the corollary of the change in stakes 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). My *habitus* finds itself beset by 'hysteresis', lagging behind the times, increasingly out of kilter with the new stakes in the field, as the already-marginal goods I value 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). I will not strive for my research to 'chime' better with the interests of managers and policy-makers in education; that is to say, to invest my *illusio* in the stakes promoted by those who dominate the field of reception of research. How could my research on youth support services have possibly done that? By (unethically) suppressing data that those dominant groups find uncomfortable? My choices may well be limited by the actions of other, more powerful players in the field, but they are also limited by the pale of my own *habitus* (cf. Reay, 2004). I *cannot* go beyond that pale. Quite literally, it is not in me to do so.

Academic freedom, an academic necessity

This account of mine could be dismissed as evidence of poor quality in my research, of my efforts to disseminate it, or simply as a case of 'sour grapes' towards those who rejected my findings. After all, the 'impact' assessment criteria for Main Panel C claim to acknowledge the potential of research which subjects public policy and bodies to scrutiny and holds them to account (HEFCE, 2012, p.68). I run a risk of being 'caught out' here, clearly lacking 'the sense of a good investment which dictates a withdrawal from outmoded, or simply devalued objects, places or practices...' (Bourdieu, 1984: 249). However, as Golsorkhi *et al.* point out:

Analysing one's relation to the object of inquiry does not mean relating the subjective experience of research and producing a self-referential and narcissistic account of this experience. It means insisting on the social conditions which act as boundaries within which the act of knowledge becomes possible. (2009, p.789)

I want to conclude, therefore, by arguing that research 'impact' is a crucial issue of academic freedom, and that certain academic necessities are required in order to defend that freedom. Here, I draw on Butler's work on academic freedom, as well as that of Bourdieu and his followers.

For Butler (2006), multiplicity and continual changes in academic norms require us to ask *which* norms are evoked in judging any piece of work, and *how* they are interpreted. Increasingly, she argues, these norms – and I would suggest that 'impact' is just such a one – are shaped by political and administrative interests, not only pronouncing on the quality of research, but also deciding what research can be funded. They are not only social and institutional, but also deeply historical, arising from the neo-liberalism which has come to dominate late capitalism. They have become codified in the US by legal moves to prevent any government funding of research which might be interpreted as critical of government, with private or charitable research sponsors soon adopting similar criteria:

...if governmental authorities stipulate what topics may be funded, they contribute to a public discourse that shifts the common understanding of the line that divides legitimate from illegitimate academic inquiry. [...] The point here is not just that a person may not get funding for a project if he or she adheres to certain views or engages in certain activities, but

also that certain views are no longer considered “fundable” and so are regarded as socially illegitimate. This can only have a deleterious effect on freedom of speech in the academy... (Butler, 2006, p.129-131)

Deer (2003) warns of the way in which similar moves have been introduced in the UK, as ‘outputs and targets have superseded input and process in the definition of academic practices’ (p.204). This extends further still, to influence more tacit judgements within institutions about hiring, promotion, and tenure (which still exists in the US) – that is, to judgements about who may and may not have academic freedom of any kind at all – and tends towards the elimination of any critical dissent.

Such conclusions are precisely the ones that academic freedom now urgently needs to avert, oppose, and forestall, and the ones against which new principles of free and critical inquiry need to be asserted most rigorously. (Butler, 2006, p.143)

As we have seen earlier, Bourdieu’s own view is that this is potentially productive terrain on which to struggle. His discussion of collective resistance by subordinate groups to defend ‘outmoded’ stakes is one of the few places in his *oeuvre* where the possibility of challenging domination is acknowledged (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). This is most effectively done as a collective undertaking of radical reflexivity, since it involves risk:

This means that researchers might clash with the hierarchy within an academic field, as [*this reflexivity*] entails unveiling dominant positions and their influence on scientific practices and the presuppositions and interests that go with them. (Golsorkhi *et al.*, 2009, p.789)

Confronting this risk is, for Bourdieu, a moral necessity for academic researchers, since our social role extends into ethical dimensions beyond the role of knowledge production alone (Golsorkhi *et al.*, 2009). He insists that we have a duty to uncover mechanisms of domination *and to disseminate what we find* (Bourdieu, 1993). And herein lies a seeming paradox: it is by defending the autonomy of the field of the production of research against heteronomy, by deploying complex theoretical reasoning and refusing to ‘dumb it down’, that academics can best ensure the dissemination of their research into other fields, into the field of reception of research, and into public debate. *Contra* Gardner (2011), radical theory is an academic necessity in defending academic freedom. This has to be done, of course, in ways which ensure the complexity of research is made accessible to a broader public audience, without ever reducing it to mere populism (Golsorkhi *et al.*, 2009, p.791). There is an important caveat to be made here in the distinction between making research accessible and making it populist. My own research was well-received by practitioners, but other research findings might be rejected by similar, subordinate groupings in the field of research reception, if they serve to critique dominant discourses and prevailing practices that have been pervaded by them (Ecclestone, personal comment). This should not undermine the value of such research.

This paper has attempted to respond to Bourdieu’s call for radical reflexivity, for the unmasking of the hidden in the field of research itself, and for an open and public engagement in debate about the issue of ‘research impact’. It seeks to undertake this academic necessity by deploying academic autonomy and scientific rigour, through the use of Bourdieu’s sociology as a framework for analysing my own experience of trying to generate ‘impact’, and encountering refusal among powerful figures in the field of reception of my research. It also seeks to generate further public discussion and debate within our community of educational research production, and especially within BERA, which is supposed to represent that community. Its conclusions suggest that education researchers need not only to resist being co-opted by narrow research agendas driven by a narrow definition of ‘impact’, but to struggle actively against that outcome.

There is, I believe, a tremendously important role for researchers, in education and elsewhere, to act as Socratic ‘gadflies’. Looking to the wider international academic community, we

can see that this ideal is still preserved in some aspects of institutional governance. In New Zealand, for example, Section 162 of the Education Act (1989) still specifies that all universities must 'accept a role as critic and conscience of society' (Universities New Zealand, 2012). Though this might appear terribly 'outmoded' as a stake, an object of value, in higher education in the UK, I argue that it is one that we should embrace. In doing so, we *should* be making a to-do about 'impact'.

Notes

1. This paper was first 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's Annual Conference, University of Manchester, 4 September 2012, and chosen to represent BERA at the Annual Conference of the American Educational Research Association, 27 April-1 May 2013.
2. Throughout this paper, I use the word 'impact' in inverted commas to denote its socially constructed definition in the terms of, for example, HEFCE's REF and research council strategy papers.

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