

Reflexivity and common sense knowledge: the paradoxes of Bourdieu's sociology of practice

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Abstract

In The Weight of the World (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002) Bourdieu propose a different methodology. While his works were essentially designed according to the most advanced quantitative methods, Bourdieu gives a central role to qualitative methodology in The Weight of the World. Additionally, he argues the importance of "induced and accompanied" interviews both for the informant and the interviewee. According to Hamel (In: Robbins D, ed. Pierre Bourdieu. London: Sage, p 142-159, 2000), Bourdieu's arguments in The Weight of the World clearly mark 'a real turning point for this author in relation to his former ideas on representativeness and objectivity, as well as on the status attributed to common sense in sociology.' However, contrary to Hamel, this paper will be critical, but sympathetic to Bourdieu's notion of reflexivity and common sense. While Bourdieu's notion of reflexivity entails a process of self consciousness, he will be criticised for ignoring a more conscious aspect of subjectivity. Indeed, the article will discuss how Bourdieu's key concept of reflexivity considers only social scientists' knowledge as reflexive and lay people's knowledge as nonreflexive. It does so with drawing on interviews in The Weight of the World.

Keywords: *Common sense knowledge, reflexivity, false consciousness, subjectivity*

Introduction

This paper discusses the question of understanding the knowledge of common sense and subjectivity in relation to Bourdieu's position in *The Weight of the World* (2002) on reflexivity. Bourdieu argued that autobiographies or life histories can be read as pure fiction: a 'biographical or rhetorical illusion' (Bourdieu, 2000a:297-302). He indicates that the autobiographical narrative is always at least partially motivated by a concern to give meaning, both for the past and for the future, through the creation of intelligible relationships. He indicates that the life history draws closer to the official presentation of the official model of the self. Thus, for Bourdieu life histories are 'the public presentation' or the 'officialisation of private representation of one's life,' which implies an excess of constraints and specific censures (Bourdieu, 2000a:301). Similarly, his socio-

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logical studies, such as those on education in French universities and the ‘socio-analysis’ of the French bourgeoisie (Bourdieu, 1998, 2000*b*) were essentially designed according to the most advanced quantitative methods. Yet, in his most recent study, *The Weight of the World* (2002), Bourdieu applied a new qualitative method, ‘provoked and accompanied self-analysis’ which marks a turning point in relation to his former positions on subjectivity and reflexivity in sociology, as well as on the importance attributed to common sense (Hamel, 2000:144).

While Pierre Bourdieu in his sociological studies on taste and education, applied advanced quantitative methods (Bourdieu, 1998, 2000*b*), in *The Weight of the World* (2002), in the ethnographic study of social suffering in post-industrial France, Bourdieu applied a new qualitative research and the tools of ethnographic objectivation (Wacquant, 2004:395). According to Wacquant (2004:387), the ethnographic roots of Bourdieu’s theoretical background lie in early field studies conducted in Algeria and in his childhood village of Béarn in southwestern France. In fact, Bourdieu has become a necessary reference point in various areas and one of these areas is cultural anthropology. His studies of the Kabyle in northern Algeria during the independence war and aftermath provided him a canonical status (Weininger, 2005:82). Nevertheless, his subsequent sociological studies including education and culture essentially drew on quantitative data. According to Hamel (2000:144), the comparison of Bourdieu’s former studies with *The Weight of the World* (2002) reveals a turning point in relation to his former positions. This article argues that Bourdieu’s application of qualitative methodology to the study of social suffering in post-industrial France indicates a different approach with respect to his former studies. Yet, Bourdieu’s position on subjectivity in his former studies haunts his notion of common sense and reflexivity in *The Weight of the World*.

Objectivity

Compare to his former studies, in *The Weight of the World* (2002) Bourdieu applies a different method. In the *The Biographical Illusion* (2000*a*) Bourdieu argues that biographical or autobiographical narrative, for instance the discourse of the interviewee, is a process of “making oneself the ideologist of one’s own life.” In fact, Bourdieu states that the autobiographical narrative is motivated by a concern to select significant events from one’s own past and to create causal links between them. Interviewees may have an interest in their biographical presentation according to their social position and trajectories. When the interviewees have this interest toward their biographical presentation, they try to be more coherent. Bourdieu identifies this process as “the artificial creation of meaning” (Bourdieu, 2000*a*:298). Furthermore, Bourdieu argues that life history is closer to the official presentation of the self. Similarly, life history does not contain intimate dialogs or exchanges between very close friends. Bourdieu calls this “the public presentation, thus the officialization, of a private representation of one’s life” (Bourdieu, 2000*a*:301). According to Bourdieu the public presentation comprises constraints and specific censors. Indeed, Bourdieu’s arguments reflect questions of objectivity in autobiographical narrative. Similarly, Bourdieu also applies advanced quantitative methods in the study of patterns of cultural taste in France in *Distinction* (2000*b*).

However, in *The Weight of the World* (2002), Bourdieu applies a new qualitative method to explore social suffering in contemporary society. In Bourdieu’s *The Weight of the World* interviews with the oppressed people are used as a source to explain the dynamics of poverty. In this way, Bourdieu takes a very different view of objectivity in which he no longer takes into account that the qualitative research interview lacks

objectivity. On the contrary, in *The Weight of the World* Bourdieu mentions the importance of interview and its methodological qualities in sociological studies. According to Bourdieu the plurality of perspectives is one of the features of human experience. He considers that human beings do not have a single, central, dominant point of view, and he Bourdieu insists on the plurality of perspectives and points of views. However, Bourdieu argues that this perspectivism is distinct from subjective relativism “which might lead to cynicism or nihilism (Bourdieu et al., 2002:4).” Pursuing this line of thought, in *The Weight of the World* (2002), each chapter consists of an interview that describes a specific aspect of suffering. Each of them has headings taken from the interview. Additionally, a detailed note on the context and conduct of the interview, its full transcription and the methodological and theoretical analysis of each testimony are presented (Bourdieu et al., 2002:1-2; Hamel, 2000:151).

In *The Weight of the World* (2002) Bourdieu also objects to the presumption that an interviewer must necessarily be socially distant and culturally different from interviewees. Indeed, when studying suffering, the contributing field researchers were intimately familiar with the persons and positions that they studied. In this way, symbolic violence inherent in the relation of ethnographic communication was minimized (Wacquant, 2004:395). In fact, investigators were free to interview respondents they knew or they could be introduced to people, for it is argued that social proximity and familiarity would reduce the symbolic violence embedded in the relationship between the interviewer and respondent (Bourdieu et al., 2002:610). As Bourdieu et al. (2002:610) states:

[S]ocial proximity and familiarity provide two of the conditions of “nonviolent” communication. For one thing, to the extent that the interviewer and the interviewee are interchangeable, researchers who are socially very close to their respondents provide them with guarantees against the threat of having subjective reasoning reduced to objective causes, and having choices experienced as free turned into objective determinisms uncovered by analysis. For another thing, one finds that in this case we can be assured of immediate and continuously confirmed agreement on the presuppositions regarding the content and form of the communication...

Hence, in his recent study Bourdieu points to the need to consider and capture the voice of the suffered. While in his previous studies his ideas on objectivity prevented him to consider interviews as a source of his research, in *The Weight of the World* it is through interviews that the ordinary men and women express their despair. Indeed, in *The Weight of the World* (2002) he applies a new qualitative research and the tools of ethnographic objectivation in which the testimony of respondents is considered as data for the patterns of social suffering and social space. This new method applied in *The Weight of the World* (2002) highlights that the testimony of respondents can reveal the patterns of capital and social space. It also indicates that Bourdieu is calling for an anti-positivistic renewal. Still, as will be argued in the next section, in *The Weight of the World* Bourdieu continues to consider lay people’s knowledge as “unaware of itself.”

Provoked and accompanied self-analysis method and reflexivity

According to Hamel, based on the interviews with the oppressed people in *The Weight of the World*, Bourdieu puts forward a new approach in the study of the different aspects of suffering in the world and invokes “the provoked and accompanied self-analysis” method. Provoked and accompanied self-analysis comprises the direct participation of social actors and sociological intervention. The sociological interview is called “provoked” due to the fact that it takes place when requested or “provoked” by sociologists. It is also termed ‘accompanied’ because, according to Bourdieu, the inter-

viewer must accompany the interviewee's remarks. It is through this process that, Hamel argues, the participant objectivization that Bourdieu mentions is possible. The provoked and accompanied self-analysis is an important feature of participant objectivization. Indeed, the interviewer can easily recognize the dispositions that he/she shares with the interviewee. As being aware of sociological theory, the interviewer objectivizes them (Hamel, 2000:149).

Furthermore, Hamel argues that in *The Weight of the World* the social actor's practical consciousness is no longer considered as false consciousness. According to Hamel, Bourdieu considers this "as routines of knowledge that tend to translate social action as the doings of individuals or groups rather than to situate it at the level of "objective relationship" constituting the very object of sociological theory (Hamel, 2000:151). This, Hamel (2000:144) argues, clearly marks a real turning point for this author in relation to his former ideas on objectivity and common sense in sociology. In comparison to Bourdieu's former positions, Hamel argues that Bourdieu has "denounced" common sense not because it is a false consciousness, but because it is based on the "spontaneous" consciousness of social actors. For Hamel, Bourdieu argues that spontaneous consciousness cannot express the reason for the respondent suffering, for it is directly related to the respondent's action. Thus, people cannot explain the reason for their suffering in sociological terms, but they can explain it in practical terms (Hamel, 2000:150). In fact, according to Bourdieu, the oppressed people interviewed in *The Weight of the World* (2002:614-615) expressed their situations in practical terms:

... certain respondents, especially the most disadvantaged, seem to grasp this situation as an exceptional opportunity offered to them to testify, to make themselves heard, to carry their experience over from the private to the public sphere; an opportunity also to explain themselves in the fullest sense of the term, that is, to construct their own point of view both about themselves and about the world and to bring into the open the point within this world from which they see themselves and the world, become comprehensible, and justified, not least for themselves.

Indeed, Bourdieu indicates that social actors have a great deal to say about their suffering and their situations. In *The Weight of the World* (2002:615) he emphasizes this aspect of reflexivity with reference to the "induced and accompanied self-analysis":

Thus one might speak of an induced and accompanied self-analysis. In more than one case, we had the feeling that the person being questioned took advantage of the opportunity we offered for a self-examination and took advantage of the permission or prompting afforded by our questions or suggestions (always open-ended and multiple, and at times reduced to a silent wait) to carry out a task of clarification—simultaneously gratifying and painful—and to give vent, at times with an extraordinary expressive intensity, to experiences and thoughts long kept unsaid or repressed.

However, Bourdieu also argues that it is the sociological theory that "conquers" and "constructs" "objective relationships." Hence, according to Bourdieu, respondents might be against objectivation of their situations. He argues (2002:620):

Social agents do not innately possess a science of what they are and what they do. More precisely, they do not necessarily have access to the core principles of their discontent or their malaise, and, without aiming to mislead, their most spontaneous declarations may express something quite different from what they seem to say.

In fact, his remarks on common sense knowledge indicate an opposition between reflexive sociologist and nonreflexive lay people. Bourdieu considers lay people's knowledge as nonreflexive since they cannot alter their lives in relation to the knowledge about their circumstances. In contrast to social scientists, lay people's knowledge is related to the routine accomplishment of day-to-day life. According to Bourdieu, this

day-to-day life is not questioned, and it is taken-for-granted that this feature enables people to continue their lives (Mesny, 2009:677-678). Indeed, even in *The Weight of the World* Bourdieu continues to consider lay people's knowledge as 'a comprehension which is "unaware of itself."

Furthermore, Bourdieu's notion of common sense knowledge and reflexivity bears resemblance to some of his concepts such as "habitus" and "feel for the game." These concepts are also criticized for being ineffective to explain how people are evaluative beings. The notion of *habitus* is central to Bourdieu's theory of practice which seeks to go beyond the opposition between theories that grasp practice solely as constituting, as expressed in phenomenology, and those that view practice solely as constituted. Thus, Bourdieu's social theory tries to formulate social life as a mutually constituting interaction of structures, dispositions, and actions wherein social structures and embodied knowledge of those structures produce enduring orientations to action which, in turn, are constitutive of social structures. Likewise, according to Bourdieu, "structuring structures" (*modus operandi*) and "structured structures" (*opus operandi*) shape and are shaped by social practice. In fact, for Bourdieu habitus is the capacity for structured improvisation (Postone et al., 1995:4). Hence, habitus can be seen as a self-regulating system of generative schemes whose durable existence produces practices that are the outcome of both objective and subjective systems of relations (Cicourel, 1995:90).

Furthermore, the notion of habitus is cumulative, that is because the structuring determinations or experiences which it produces early in life, influence later acquisitions of habitus. In fact, the experiences acquired in the family influence the structuring of the school experiences, and these have their effect on work experiences (Cicourel, 1995:90). Thus, the agents' habitus is a past which survives in the present, and tends to perpetuate itself into the future by making itself present in practices structured according to its principles (Lienard and Servais, 2000:88).

However, Bourdieu's habitus concept emphasizes our partly subconscious orientation to the world and our feel for the game. In fact, it ignores a more conscious aspect of subjectivity. According to Sayer even in the case of Bourdieu's favourite example of the tennis player the habitus and feel for the game require some conscious effort of the actor (Sayer, 2005:26, 35). It is possible for actors "to deliberate on their situation and on what they have become" (Sayer, 2005:30). Hence, Bourdieu's concept of habitus, and his notion of commonsense knowledge characterize lay people's knowledge and their daily practice as nonreflexive.

Nevertheless, interviews in *The Weight of the World* reflect a real questioning of this approach. The testimony of Farida, a French woman of Algerian parentage interviewed by Abdelmalek Sayad in *The Weight of the World*, indicates that actors manage to change the constraints concerning that lay people are unreflexive cultural dupes who are incapable of critical reflection upon their circumstances. Indeed, when we are faced with constraints, we moderate our ambitions or we can change the constraints (Sayer, 2005:30). Sayad calls this process 'emancipation.' Hence, contrary to Bourdieu's arguments, the case of Farida indicates that actors are evaluative beings in that they can objectify their own position, recognize the constraints, and can even change them. Indeed, Farida had struggle against her father's domination. She also had managed to change herself through a self-analysis process in which she forced herself to learn to listen and think at the same time, to walk and to associate with people like the other young women who had learned these social skills throughout their youth (Bourdieu et al., 2002:581, Sayer, 2005:30). Farida explains this as follows (Bourdieu et al., 2002:586):

... when I left, I realized the damage and destruction, as you say. I had to relearn everything... No, I had to learn everything. To speak normally, to listen without trembling; to listen and think at the same time, something that I had never learned to

do, I didn't know how to listen, to reflect on what someone's telling me since I wasn't listening. I learned to walk, to associate with people and not to run away; in a word, to live. Something still remains: I cannot stand public places, I took a long time before going to the movies.

And she continues (Bourdieu et al., 2002:586).

... all alone on my own, I will never go to a restaurant, I have never learned how to eat in public. I had to have a total reeducation, a big effort...to learn what everyone does naturally.

Hence, without being provoked by the interviewer, informants can objectify or evaluate their conditions that objectification is not only in the control of the interviewer. Likewise, the empirical findings of *The Weight of the World* reveal that people react against and resist at least some parts of their habitat (Sayer, 2005:31). The habitat that we live in can be a constraint that determines our lives. According to Bourdieu, actors acquire a habitus that corresponds to the habitat or field. Thus, habitus is automatically formed depending on the social positions or the habitat of the individual. However, Pierre Bourdieu's (2002:427-429) interview with Malik in *The Weight of the World* indicates that actors may refuse to accept their first habitat from the start. Malik was 19 years old. His father was born in Algeria and arrived in France shortly before Malik's birth. Malik had a desire to leave the habitat where he was living. He had had this desire since he was a little kid. He knew that his dream of escape would never come true. As he puts it, "I'm sure of one thing, I'm going to stay here. But right now I don't want to... But I am going to get out of here (Bourdieu et al., 2002:434)." He also stated that educational system did not offer him a job, but a "dead end" qualification. This "internal conversation" of Malik indicates that even though he knew where he was standing and that it would not be easy to achieve his desire to leave, Malik was intended to struggle to change his habitat. In fact, even though the changes to escape from habitat are limited, people still resist their habitat. Thus, it is important to see these struggles within the social field.

In his former studies Bourdieu attempted to formulate a reflexive approach to social life in order to uncover the social and cultural reproduction of inequality. As a theorist of society, he was 'both an analyst of science and society, and an actor in these fields (Postone et al., 1995:6). Still, Bourdieu's remarks on common sense knowledge indicate an opposition between reflexive sociologist and nonreflexive lay people. As Archer argues reflexivity is not the preserve of academics. People, regardless of their social position, exercise reflexivity.¹ In fact, it is argued that "the denial of the life of the mind in working class in much sociological writing" is a tendency that is mostly seen in middle class thinking (Sayer, 2005:29). Indeed, the interview transcripts presented in *The Weight of the World* show that not only the academics but also lay people exercise reflexivity.

As an illustration of conscious monitoring, we can take an interview from *The Weight of the World* conducted by Loic J.D. Wacquant with Ricky. Ricky was 29 year old, and had never had a steady job. He had been working as a hustler and his subsistence depended on illegal activities. Ricky had a dream of being a Post Office worker, a position that historically provided access for black Americans to middle class positions. However, he knew that this dream of escape from the ghetto could be possible through the informal and illegal economy of the street and professional sports. This is illus-

¹ The argument that lay people lack reflexivity has also been questioned from another perspective. It has been argued that in the contemporary society, lay people's knowledge ability increasingly reflects features that are close to social scientist's knowledge as lay people increasingly develop reflexive knowledge in day-to-day life (Mesny, 2009:678).

trated by his self-analysis of his occupational trajectory and future plans of retiring from hustling before it got too late (Bourdieu et al., 2002:148, 155, 162, 188). In fact, Ricky answered the question about whether he thought he would eventually be a postal worker as follows (Bourdieu et al., 2002:162):

Well, I don't know. Right now, right now I'm hopin' tha' uh, my boxin' career follows thru for me. Like I say: I'm not foolin' myself, I'mma pretty goo' fighter, I got some goo' people workin' with me right now, takin' my time, ya know. An' then in the meanwhile, I'mma be in school so if tha' don't fall through, boom, I start git me a job.

Furthermore, the interviews of *The Weight of the World* indicate that people not only self-analyze their own and others' conducts but sometimes they try to explain it. In fact, people often attempt to explain why people behave in particular ways especially where they find such behaviour objectionable (Sayer, 2005:188). However, Bourdieu in *The Weight of the World* argues that such deliberations are usually partial and semi-lucid (Bourdieu et al., 2002:4):

It is true that one sometimes encounters individuals whose social trajectory, quite as much as their position, inclines them to a vision divided against itself. I am thinking here of the woman selling sporting goods in a "difficult" housing project even as she expresses sympathy for their position. But, more often than not, the direct confrontation of differences encourages the partiality and semi-lucidity of polemics. Such is the case, for example, of the Spanish immigrant woman who points out the differences between European families, which combine a low birthrate and strong discipline, and the very prolific North African families which are frequently doomed to anomie by the crisis in paternal authority.

However, people sometimes think as sociologists and evaluate other people's conduct. As Sayer (2005:188) argues, Bourdieu would have been opposed to such a description due to the fact that it projects the contemplative life of academics onto their own study. Indeed, as seen above, Bourdieu argues that people are usually partial in their evaluative explanations. In our view, actions range from unreflective practical action to rational deliberation and the interviews in *The Weight of the World* underline such deliberations. The interview conducted by Patrick Champagne in *The Weight of the World* with four workers living and working on a run-down public housing estate clearly indicates this. In the public housing project anti-social behaviours such as burglaries and violence are common features of daily life. Three of the interviewees were building superintendents. They were middle-aged, male and working class people. The fourth interviewee was a female who worked in the housing project office, and had a slightly more educational and cultural capital from the formers. The testimonies of the four workers described anti-social behaviour of the youth, but also presented explanations (Sayer, 2005:189). One of the interviewees, Thierry, explained the anti-social behaviour of the youth in relation to social exclusion as (Bourdieu et al., 2002:112):

... For the most part you have the father who, well in most cases he arrived in' 53, in' 54, he has always worked; now he is retired. The wife never worked; so now the kids, the other ones, are unemployed, they can't find jobs. So what do they do? They steal cars, break into stores, stuff like that, and drugs. And I must say something else now, it's that the kids all know each other, in all the neighbourhoods, so if they all want to gather together in a certain place there is no way to stop them.

Thus, we need to recognize that people are evaluative beings. They make evaluations where they find the behaviour objectionable or they can react to their circumstances.

Conclusion

In *The Weight of the World* Bourdieu suggests a new methodological approach which can be summarized as the “democratization of the hermeneutic stance” (Bourdieu et al., 2002:624). In comparison to his position in *Distinction* (2000b), he argues that transcribed interviews “provide a more accessible equivalent of complex, abstract conceptual analysis: they render tangible the objective structures which scientific work strives to expose.” Indeed, he argues that the testimony of postal employees who often pay for career advancement with an exile in Paris have much more to say than the abstract cold conceptual language of analysis. Pursuing this line of thought, Bourdieu opens new perspectives for the study of sociology and the understanding of the practical knowledge of the social actors. However, as argued in this article, his notion of common sense and reflexivity in *The Weight of the World* still lacks a conscious aspect of subjectivity since Bourdieu considers social scientists’ knowledge as reflexive and lay people’s knowledge as nonreflexive.

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