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Challenging lifelong learning policy discourse: Where is structure in agency in narrative-based research?

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Abstract

Can adult educational research on learning and identity counter the individualising of neoliberal government policy that seeks to constrain educational ‘choices’ to those that contribute to government economic agendas? This article notes the recent move within post-compulsory education research towards an engagement with Bourdieu because of perceived limitations in the research and analysis of learner identities. In particular, Bourdieu is drawn upon as a conceptual resource in order adequately to account for the influence of social structure as well as agency. We contextualise our exploration of this conceptual move by outlining the way hegemonic policy discourses work to economise the field of UK education and training, specifically the cultivation of particular dispositions towards learning – the ‘responsible learner’. We focus on a strand of work that has engaged with Bourdieu’s conceptual framework in order to provide a social-structural account of learner experiences. We do this through a brief exploration of the development of the concepts of ‘learning career’ and ‘learning culture’. We ask to what extent the concepts of learning ‘career’ and ‘culture’ have worked, and argue that analysis of social structure deployed through these concepts, particularly the immanence of structure in the practices of adult learners, is less well developed. The article concludes with an outline of some new research questions to understand how adults engage with formal learning, specifically whether or not they are responsible learners and reflexive agents and what are the forms and meanings of these notions of responsibility and reflexivity. In setting out this research agenda we hope to contribute to furthering counter-hegemonic research on adults’ learning in a context of social and economic structural change, and to avoid being ‘captured by the discourse’.

Keywords

Bourdieu, adult learners, policy discourse, reflexivity, structure, agency

Introduction

Research on adults' learning is moving centre stage in many countries as policy makers seek to develop responses to global processes of change. Foremost within these responses have been policy texts and practices focusing on learning, skills and employability for the knowledge economy (Department for Education and Employment, 2001; Department for Trade and Industry, 1998) that have frequently mobilised research as evidence for new policies and practices. A key example of this realignment to an 'evidence-based' approach to policy formation is the UK Labour Government's funding of a number of research centres, notably the Centre for the Wider Benefits of Learning, the Centre for the Economics of Education, and the Centre for Evidence Informed Policy and Practice in Education. However, these centres may interpret 'evidence-based' policy in ways contrary to dominant policy concerns. This general phenomenon of giving education an economic orientation is not a uniquely British affair. Stephen Ball and Martin Thrupp, in relation to compulsory schooling, have noted a process of 'policy borrowing' whereby a neoliberal orthodoxy on education emanates from the OECD and World Bank, and circulates through ideologically different national governments (Ball, 1999; Thrupp, 2001). There is a strong Eurocentric dimension to this (Preece, 2006), with key documents produced by the European Union (EU) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) framing much of the conceptualisation of lifelong learning policy globally (Commission of the European Communities, 1999, 2000; OECD, 2001). The influence of these regional and global agencies appears to be producing a great degree of policy alignment around the economic function of lifelong learning and the necessary education reforms to bring that about whether in Asia (Hemmi, 2006; Kennedy, 2004; Kumar, 2004), Africa (Aitchison, 2004; Preece, 2006; Wallis, 1999), Australia and Aotearoa, New Zealand (Chapman *et al.*, 2005; Tobias, 2004), or the Americas (Drodge and Shiroma, 2004; Fenwick, 2004). The implementation of these 'borrowed' policies reflects the particularities of national states. Despite this, the main thrust of these global policies is to tie education to economic objectives. Of course, there is nothing particularly new in this linking of educational and economic objectives. But, as Richard Taylor (2005) comments, the prominence it is currently given is significant and substantial. What does this mean for education research, particularly the education and learning of adults? Are researchers making their own research problems or taking these from the policy world as in the so-called engineering (Hammersley, 1994) or R&D (Ainley, 2000) models of research? Has the rise of new funding streams (such as the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC)¹ Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) in the UK and its parallels in Europe) of research tied to policy and practice questions limited the space for critical engagement with disciplinary questions about social theory? In other words, has the research on adults' learning been 'captured by the discourse' of policy makers (Bowe *et al.*, 1994; Coffield, 1998, 1999b)?

Our interest in these questions has been prompted by a re-reading of Bourdieu and his concept of *doxa*. Bourdieu uses the concept of *doxa* to explain how a taken-for-granted commonsense world view is promoted by policy texts and is a product of and is linked to relations of power; a *doxa* is the 'point of view of the dominant, which presents and imposes itself as a universal point of view' (Bourdieu, 2003, p. 57). Our concern is with how research on adults and their learning is struggling to carve out a critical space from which to critique this *doxa* and avoid being 'captured by the dis-

course'. In particular, we are concerned with the way the policy discourses of the individualised 'responsible learner' are played out in key research programmes in the field of post-compulsory education and training (PCET).

We argue that the struggle to carve out a critical research space is largely being structured around the relationship between structure and agency. It is in this regard that we believe there has been a recent move within PCET research in the UK towards an engagement with the conceptual framework of Bourdieu. In particular, Bourdieu is drawn upon as a conceptual resource in order adequately to account for the influence of social structure as well as agency. This move towards Bourdieu might also be understood as a desire among researchers committed to ideas of social justice to carve out a more independent space from which to critique current UK policy.

Before outlining the structure of the article we want to clarify the terminology we intend to use. We deploy a number of terms, specifically 'discourse', 'structure', and 'agency', which are central to our argument. Each term is complex and acts to condense a broader range of theoretical positions so, in the space available, we will provide brief definitions of our usage. Their meaning will, we hope, appear more clearly in our use of them in our argument.

In making their case for critical discourse analysis, Lilie Chouliarakis and Norman Fairclough (2004) argue persuasively that a significant aspect of late modernity is the deployment of symbolic capital in the form of linguistic devices and forms of communication. While lifelong learning is already a reality in that it is manifest in new organisational forms, qualification frameworks, and funding mechanisms, it is backed up and articulated as necessary through a range of policy documents and governmental speeches as discourse. In a very real sense, lifelong learning is 'talked' into reality, discourse defining what is necessary/unnecessary, sensible/nonsense, meaningful/meaningless.

But not all social life is reducible to discourse and its effects. Our argument rests upon the assumption of there being a social structure that discourse is both situated within and constitutive of. For us, then, social structures can be conceived as '...the outcome of repeated human thought and action in the form of widespread, systematic, and sustained practices, such as systems of property ownership or marriage' (Sayer and Walker, 1993, p. 13). Our main focus is on the social structuring of life within late modern capitalist society, on the particular orderings and systems of domination inherent in such a system. Social structures, whether of race, gender or social class are permeable and emergent rather than fixed, but they require a certain degree of regularity and predictability to function (Hudson, 2005), and it is in this sense, the temporary permanences, that we can speak of social structures. Social agents are therefore not simply bearers of social structure, yet discourses and material resources constrain the intelligible ways of being human in particular places at specific times. Human agency is not voluntaristic. The notion of agency utilised in our argument is linked to Bourdieu's concept of 'practice'. The concept of practice invokes the idea of the ordinary and mundane as saturated with the social relations they are embedded within, of what people do that both reproduces social structure, and changes it, of social action being '... what is done in a particular place, and what is hardened into relative permanency - a practice in the sense of a habitual way of acting' (Chouliarakis and Fairclough, 2004, p. 22).

The first part of the paper considers how the field of hegemonic policy discourse is constituted. In particular we identify the discourse of 'the responsible learner' as a form

of moral regulation in which certain individuals and groups are required to make themselves amenable to the global economy. The second part is concerned with research as a counter discourse, noting the increasing turn to the writings of Bourdieu to reveal the relationship between structure and agency in learners' narratives. More specifically we examine the development of the concepts of 'learning career' and 'learning culture'. We note how the accounts offer new ways of considering structure and agency through utilising a symbolic interactionist approach and Bourdieu's conceptual framework. We develop some questions to discuss whether the aspirations of this conceptual work are being realised currently in relation to an account of learning, learning institutions and learners in an area experiencing globalising processes of change. We consider new ways of capturing the dynamism of structure and agency in the analysis of the accounts that learners present of becoming 'responsible' for their learning. The article concludes with an outline of some new research questions to understand how adults engage with formal learning. In setting out this research agenda we hope it may contribute to furthering counter-hegemonic research on adults' learning in a context of social and economic structural change, and avoid being 'captured by the discourse'.

Constituting the field

What is the new commonsense worldview, the *doxa*? In this section we outline the discursive and material elements that are articulated together to form the hegemonic policy formation within which UK PCET research is conducted. Although our broader focus is on the UK context, the devolution of powers to national governments in Scotland and Wales means that in many respects substantial aspects of our discussion are largely confined to the situation pertaining to England. However, evidence strongly suggests that there is a similar process of economisation of PCET in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (Crowther, 2003; Gorard, 2000; McLeavy *et al.*, 2004). The focus on England allows us to examine simultaneously the particularities of reform at the local level as well as the ways these local practices resonate with global discourses of lifelong learning.

Globalisation and the economisation of education as the new commonsense

A clear mission for FE, focused on the employability and progression of learners, is central to delivering the skills and qualifications which individuals, employers and the economy need. (Department for Education and Skills, 2006, p. 20)

Skills are central to achieving our national goals of prosperity and fairness. (Department for Education and Skills, 2005, p. 5)

The current UK Labour Government presents a policy narrative that is constructed around a number of related assertions that characterise the policy problem. This policy narrative can be understood as forming a taken-for-granted commonsense view of the world – the world as globalisation. It is argued across a range of policy texts that global processes of economic restructuring have reconfigured the relationship between national economies and global markets, refashioning the kinds of skills and knowledge perceived as necessary for economic growth and competitiveness (see Brown and

Lauder, 1992; Coffield, 1999a). Related to this, technological developments, as part of the globalisation process, are viewed as transforming the labour process, with consequent impacts upon traditional notions of career and working lives. The forward to the recent Skills White Paper states quite clearly that one of its key objectives is ‘Replacing the redundant notion of a “job for life” with our new ambition of “employability for life”, thus helping people and communities meet the challenge of the global economy’ (Department for Education and Skills, 2005, p. 1). In particular, globalisation is seen as introducing new risks and uncertainties, disrupting traditional patterns of transition into and through employment (Field, 2000, 2001; Strain and Field, 1997). This theme is picked up by the recent UK Government White Paper on further education (Department for Education and Skills, 2006).

This is a complex and slippery discourse. While the main thrust is directed at an economisation of education, it also brings into play other concepts, such as social capital, that have conceptual affinity with some of the traditional aims of adult education (see Department for Education and Skills, 1998; Social Exclusion Unit, 2001). Consequently, John Field and Stewart Ranson express an optimism about the potential of lifelong learning for the reinvigoration of social democracy and public space from below, echoing an older aspiration of liberal adult education in the UK (Field, 2001; Ranson, 1994, 1998; Strain and Field, 1997). However, others argue that hegemonic policy formations in the field of PCET constitute new forms of domination and governmentality within capitalist society (Crowther, 2004; Martin, 2003). This view leads James Avis (2000) to argue that the dominance of neoliberalism within the fields of economics and politics are transforming the field of education, in particular the dominance of human capital theory in framing policy priorities:

Clearly the aim becomes that of creating an education system that develops human capital and forms of autonomy required not only by the economic system but throughout the social formation. (p. 191)

In Avis’s view, UK Government policy is concerned primarily with creating the conditions amenable to global capitalism and the potential of individuals to contribute to that. Our argument here is that economic discourses are being imposed on the field of education, including that of PCET. This process is one that can be referred to as ‘cross-field effects’, of shifts in one field of social practice, the dominance of human capital theory and neoliberalism in economics, creating effects in another, education and training (Lingard *et al.*, 2005; Maton, 2005). Importantly this highlights the way fields of practice are socially constructed, and the necessity that we go beyond an analysis of the symbolic order of discourse and that of experience (phenomenologies) and understand the role of the state, policy networks and social forces in creating the social conditions for practice. Increasingly, as argued by Bob Lingard and colleagues, this includes an understanding of the globalised nature of the field of education, with the rising influence of international agencies such as the OECD and the World Bank.

This process of cross-field effects can be illustrated by focusing on the way the symbolic and bureaucratic reforms of PCET work to constitute new educational practices, in particular the constitution of the ‘responsible learner’.

The ‘responsible learner’

The ‘responsible learner’ forms a central character in hegemonic policy narratives. This process of responsabilisation has been noted in policy frameworks around young

people, education and labour markets (Ball *et al.*, 2000, Dwyer and Wyn, 2001; Kelly, 2001; Kelly and Kenway, 2001). James Avis (2000, p. 196) has noted this process in the field of PCET as one where 'We are to become responsible for our own actions as individuals, investing in our own development thus increasing our capacity as human capital'. Jim Crowther (2004) and Ian Martin (2003) have argued that adult education, rather than being a space for critical reflection on the condition of society, is increasingly a space for the moral regulation of individuals, where they are called upon to work upon themselves in order to be more amenable to the demands of mobile capital.

The policy narrative and the bureaucratic reforms that have sought to realise the discourse through regulatory frameworks, institutional arrangements, curriculum reform and funding streams work on the basis of privileging the process of choice, and ensuring learners are making the right kind of choices and being provided with options to choose from. In other words, paraphrasing Bourdieu (2005, p. 15), educational choices depend, on the one hand, on the socially constituted educational dispositions of agents and their resources and, on the other, on the state of supply. Obscured here is the role of the state in constructing education and training markets, and the relations of power that impose a particular point of view on the field of PCET. Not only does the state contribute to the state of supply, but it is actively engaged in 'the production of individual dispositions and, more precisely, of systems of individual preferences' (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 16).

A range of research in PCET has highlighted how regulatory frameworks, curriculum reform and funding mechanisms frame the way people make choices about entering formal learning in further and higher education. Research on the role of these 'choices' in the context of market reforms of education in England has illustrated the way policy has produced particular kinds of education and training 'markets', constituting different circuits of provision that are hierarchically ordered and thus constructing the context within which 'choices' are made (Ball *et al.*, 2000; Reay *et al.*, 2001). This research has demonstrated how reform of the further and higher education sector has a direct impact on the choice preferences of individuals, as well as the continuing framing of decisions along lines of gender, ethnicity and class. Carole Leathwood, Louise Archer and colleagues at London Metropolitan University have shown how policy as discourse and practice, particularly through the widening participation agenda, constructs learners in the post-1992 universities² often in deficit terms, as qualitatively different from those in pre-1992 institutions (Archer *et al.*, 2003; Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). In other words policy as discourse and bureaucratic reform work to construct the market conditions and structure of preferences that constitutes hierarchies of categories of learner.

If personal dispositions are, in part, actively constructed through state action, and the social conditions of choice are complicit with relations of power, what is the role of research in PCET? Is a focus on the learner experience and their accounts of their 'choices' adequate to understand the processes at play that constitute these conditions of choice? At a time when globalised forces are producing localised effects in terms of economic restructuring and educational reform, is largely localised educational research focus enough?

Educational research as counter-discourse?

As we have indicated above, the UK New Labour Government has sought to harness educational research to policy production and bureaucratic reform. We have also

argued that this is framed by a particular commonsense worldview – life as globalisation. Furthermore we have suggested that intellectual moves towards Bourdieu in the UK field of PCET research are linked to attempts to construct a critical space from which to critique this policy formation. Consequently, in this section and throughout the article we ask to what extent is UK PCET research ‘captured by the discourse’ of hegemonic policy formation, and to what extent does it escape the discourse? We focus upon the development of the concepts of ‘learning career’ and ‘learning cultures’ as an important attempt to construct a counter-discourse to hegemonic policy narratives.

Struggles with structure and agency – learning career and learning culture

A number of important contemporary studies in the field of PCET in the UK have sought to utilise Bourdieu’s conceptual framework to guide their analysis (see Archer *et al.*, 2003; Ball *et al.*, 2000; Reay *et al.*, 2001). Common to all of these authors is a struggle with how to represent the relationship between structure and agency. While privileging the agency and voice of learners, particularly marginalised learners, this research notes the way agency is constrained, the way decision-making processes are always more than individual acts, are always cut across by social class, gender, race/ethnicity, disability. For instance, Stephen Ball and colleagues assert that ‘We want to recognise both the individual construction of social identities and the different structural possibilities and conditions for such construction’ (Ball *et al.*, 2000, p. 24).

Using a different language, Karen Evans and colleagues conclude in their work that career patterns emerge as a combination of structure and agency, produced by the interplay of trajectory and career behaviour, and state that ‘Career outcomes depend not only on the transition behaviour of young people but also on the institutional and labour market settings and social support available’ (Evans *et al.*, 2000, p. 127). Importantly, these research studies foreground the socially constructed nature of decision-making – while many of the learners often mirror the ‘responsible learner’ of policy discourse, this occurs within a context where persistent inequalities largely remain intact (see also Leathwood and O’Connell, 2003).

In a similar attempt to capture a dynamic relationship between structure and agency in the context of post-compulsory education, the concept of ‘learning career’ was developed (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000a, 2000b; Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2000, 2001; Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). ‘Learning career’, then, is offered as a counter to hegemonic policy discourses of education. Situating their work within a broadly socio-cultural approach to learning, these researchers are interested in the relationship between learning and identity, and learning as a situated social practice. They are interested in understanding what the complex of personal and structural relations are that influence learners’ dispositions to learning, defining career as ‘...the ongoing unfolding of a person’s dispositions to, and their engagement with, knowledge and learning opportunities’ (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997, p. 7).

This conceptual work appears to be attempting a synthesis between symbolic interactionism and Bourdieu’s [(post-)structuralist] approach, while being aware of the tensions involved in this project. The concept of ‘learning career’ is the mechanism for attempting this. The concept of ‘career’ derives from symbolic interactionism (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000b), drawing on Anselm Strauss’s concept of ‘turning points’ or critical moments that provoke a re-evaluation of our positions and trajectories. The con-

cept of careership echoes Bourdieu's notion of the necessary relation between position (within a social space of action - structure) and disposition, where:

Career decisions can only be understood in terms of the life histories of those who make them, wherein identity has evolved through interaction with significant others and with the culture in which the subject has lived and is living. (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997, p. 33)

This conceptual work of linking symbolic interactionism with Bourdieu's framework has formed the intellectual basis for some current work within the ESRC *Teaching and Learning Research Programme* (TLRP). Specifically of interest in this regard is the *Transforming Learning Cultures* project (TLC) (see Bloomer and James, 2001; Hodkinson *et al.*, 2004). This is because the concept of 'learning career' has been further developed by Bloomer and Hodkinson in the context of the TLC research group with their notion of 'learning cultures' (Bloomer and James, 2001; Hodkinson *et al.*, 2004; James, 2002). This signals a further engagement with Bourdieu, in particular with the concept of habitus.

As with James Avis (2006) we focus on this ongoing project because of its importance, not only for the conceptual work TLC has engaged in, but also by virtue of the central issue for this article - the extent to which PCET research can escape the discourse of hegemonic policy formations. The TLC project is worthy of examination because of the dominance of the TLRP within UK educational research, organised as it is around questions that have conceptual affinity with that of the hegemonic policy discourse. We also focus on it because one aim of this article is to build upon the conceptual work conducted by TLC.

Therefore we pose the following questions to aid our examination. Has this use of Bourdieu been useful? Has it enabled researchers to understand the making and taking of an identity as individuals negotiate their 'learner careers' in circumstances not of their own making? To examine this we need to consider whether the concept can take us beyond the phenomenologies of learners, to understand agency as something which is not simply a voluntary act.

Beyond phenomenologies?

In an introduction to the *British Journal of the Sociology of Education's* special edition devoted to the influence of Bourdieu on educational research, Diane Reay (2004) notes that while many researchers have utilised the concepts of habitus and cultural capital, they have often failed to grasp adequately the totality of Bourdieu's conceptual framework, and in particular his concept of field. The centrality of 'field' in Bourdieu's framework has recently been the focus for another special issue on Bourdieu, this time by the *Journal of Education Policy*. Here a number of authors explored the importance and utility of the concept of field, especially its relationship to the concepts of capital and habitus (see for instance Lingard *et al.*, 2005; Maton, 2005; Thomson, 2005).

Deborah Reed-Danahay (2005) also notes that Bourdieu adopted the term 'field' (champ) from its connotation in physics of a field of forces, thereby focusing on the social, cultural, economic and symbolic forces at play within an arena of social practice (p. 133). Field is therefore a relational concept. The particular configuration of capitals in a field determines the positions and range of strategies available to social agents. However, it is the particular deployment of strategies that allow social agents to take

places within the field that reproduce or transform the social order. To understand how learners engage with transformations in their learning careers, not only is some understanding of the resources available to them within the field needed, but also which resources are differently available, and who can get access to and make use of the most powerful resources. For Bourdieu, fields of practice are not given. Therefore it is part of the empirical work of research to illuminate the socially and historically constituted nature of fields of practice, how their boundaries are set and maintained, how they confer legitimacy on particular social and cultural practices, and give value to the different resources available to social agents. The question that follows is whether the potential and promise of the concepts of learning 'career' and 'culture' to understand the complex of personal and structural relations that influence learners' dispositions to learning have been realised yet.

Do the concepts of learning 'career' and 'culture' work?

Analysis undertaken using the concepts of 'learning career' and 'learning culture' have clearly countered the hegemonic discourse which constructs learners and learner choices in terms of a reductionist rational choice economic model. Such research highlights the way learners in PCET settings engage in ways of 'becoming', taking on and working with institutional and vocational cultures, as much as learning discrete areas of skill and knowledge. For instance, TLC provides analytical descriptions of the way learners 'become' childcare workers, health professionals and engineers (Colley *et al.*, 2003). 'Learning culture' works well to capture the negotiation with vocational cultures. Another feature of the use of learning 'career' and 'culture' is the depiction of personal transformations that can describe adaptations to cultural contexts, for instance to the learning cultures of a Sixth Form College (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2000), or personal transformations due to 'turning points' in individuals' lives (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000a; Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997).

However, it is 'habitus', and the notion of dispositions towards learning rather than 'field', that has captured the sociological imagination of TLC and others. For instance, 'habitus' appears to be deployed within these accounts as a signal for the constraints on individual agency, much in the same way that the concept of 'horizons for action' does (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). Consequently, they provide analytical descriptions that demonstrate the context-dependent nature of decision-making about courses and employment, and the formation of learner identities in part by personal biographies and institutional cultures. However, the analysis of 'field' and the different resources available to learners within a field of practice are muted. Despite the deployment of the language of 'habitus' and 'field', the learning, institutional or vocational cultures that learners are seen as engaging with appear as relatively static. There is little sense of the policy shift in responsibilities away from state welfare to privatised and individual responsibility reflected in the accounts. Indeed, the research evidence from the TLC project is used to confirm a continuity of vocational habitus with that outlined by Bates (1991, 1994) in the early 1990s. Is this because the conditions of work have largely not changed and, for some, the post-Fordist workplace is mythical, or that the methodological approach focusing on learner and tutor narratives has sidelined the impact of structural changes?³

Crossan *et al.* (2003) argue that in part the focus on young people in the work on learning identities and learning career has resulted in an overly unilinear and progressive view. In their work on adult learners they provide for a rather more dynamic

sense of these cultures in accounts that identify identities as fragile, contingent and vulnerable to external changes, and include hostility to education and denial, even from enthusiastic learners. They suggest that this is in contrast to the accounts of young people's 'learning career' and 'learning culture', where there is little sense of the immanence of social structure in the intimate details of learners' practices.

Nevertheless, because this body of work on 'learning career' and 'learning culture' acts as a counter-narrative to hegemonic policy discourses, the authors are often keen to demonstrate that learners do indeed act responsibly and rationally, albeit not in ways recognised by policy. They provide accounts that demonstrate that learners make rational decisions that have meaning within their own life-worlds. We come back to our central question – can research escape the discourse? While the accounts provided by 'learning career' and 'cultures' show the ways that dispositional changes are not simply acts of cognitive agency unconstrained by 'a complex combination of social and economic factors, individual preferences and beliefs, and contingency' (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2001, p. 117), we are concerned that they may depict a similarly cognitive agency to that articulated by hegemonic policy discourse if they do not explicate the ways in which learners negotiate transformations that are often pre-reflexive.

Learner identities as articulated moments – some research questions

The above analysis has led us to ask a range of related questions that suggest the need for research into PCET to deploy a more detailed articulation of 'field' and 'habitus' if we are not either to be 'captured by the discourse' of hegemonic policy formations or to rely on depictions of learners' voluntaristic transformations. In this we are seeking to develop methodologies to answer research questions about the 'connections between the private lives of individuals and their public lives as citizens' (Crowther, 2004, p. 134).

Sheffield – a case study in social-structural change

We use a sketch of Sheffield in northern England as a means of suggesting how the social fields learners may inhabit have been altered, and therefore provide something of an empirical rationale for the research questions that follow. This sketch is necessarily brief. In almost every sense Sheffield has been caught up in processes of change. Sheffield was for centuries a centre for metal technologies (see Hey, 2005), remaining a centre for high quality steels and cutlery until the economic crisis of the 1970s (Hudson and Sadler, 1989). Sheffield stands as an example of the transformative changes brought about by globalisation. Whereas in 1971 something like 50 per cent of Sheffield's economic activity was related to steel production, by the late 1970s and mid-1980s, the city's 'economy had effectively collapsed' (Sheffield First Partnership, 2002, p. 11). Currently, the Learning and Skills Council's forecast for 2002–2010 is that the key growth sectors in Sheffield will be in health, banking and insurance, communications, personal services, business services, and education (Learning and Skills Council South Yorkshire, 2004). We can see in Sheffield transformations from an economy dominated by manufacturing, specifically steel production, to one where the service sector predominates (Sheffield City Council, 2004; Sheffield First Partnership, 2002). This might suggest that Sheffield is experiencing a shift from 'material' to 'immaterial' labour, the emergence of forms of labour that produce immaterial goods, such as services,

cultural products, knowledge or communication; engendering a transformation in the relationships between knowledge, learning and identity (Hardt and Negri, 2000). Importantly for our discussion, these transformations are not the product of 'natural' economic forces or the internal inadequacies of Sheffield's skills base. Rather they are the product of national and global economic restructuring on the part of national and multinational companies (Massey, 1994) and of governmental policy interventions where re-industrialisation policies reflected a new common sense wherein rational planning was impossible. The strategy was market-led, and national and local governments were left to pick up the pieces (Hudson and Sadler, 1989).

This structural description gives an indication of the economic field that might have produced the kinds of caring and engineering vocational cultures investigated by TLC. The particular dominant industrial sectors, and the social class, gender and ethnic relations within those sectors, is likely to have given specific characteristics to any related vocational cultures within local education and training systems. Any focus on adult learners would necessarily have to consider how the structural shifts outlined above might affect economic, social and learning identities. In what sense are the vocational cultures depicted by TLC the same as or different from those formed within those occupational sectors ten or twenty years ago? Or are those vocational and learning cultures transformed by the radical transformations in the social formations they are situated within? In other words, what impact does the political economy of education and training have on the space for agency within different learning sites? How has the relation between knowledge, identity and learning been re-worked by the rise of mobile capital (Lash and Urry, 1996; Urry, 2000) and 'immaterial labour' (Hardt and Negri, 2000)? Following Bourdieu, this is a matter for empirical investigation.

Of course, very little might have changed. TLC infers this in an analysis of class, gender and emotion in childcare education and training. Helen Colley (2006), partly drawing on Marxist feminism as well as Bourdieu, argues that the vocational cultures cultivated in a childcare course are implicated in the young women's (16-19 year olds) class and gender subordination, and linked to changing modes of production. The suggestion is that despite the various forms of accommodation or resistance these young women show to the course, and regardless of the personal satisfactions achieved, ultimately the dispositions cultivated within the course do the work of reproducing the social system. In this Colley (2006) provides a glimpse of how the course is situated within the learning site, and how the learning site is located within a particular structure of education and training, through her discussion of the disjunctures between the understandings of childcare tutors, formed predominantly from employment in the public sector, and understandings of students entering a predominantly privatised edubusiness, which is increasingly trying to exploit more intensively sources of labour power - particularly employees' emotional capacities - which might yet yield greater added value. In other words, this account chimes with our interest in how the field of education and training is historically constituted and implicated in learning careers and learning cultures.

We are arguing that to avoid being captured by the hegemonic policy discourse, it is not enough for researchers to base a socially engaged project on the phenomenological accounts of learners. Although we acknowledge that life stories are a way of 'fashioning identity' for the self and others (Ochberg, 1994, p. 114), these accounts, themselves, are often products of power differentials. We agree with Gavin Smith (1999, p. 10), therefore, that the self/identity has to be reflected upon '...within the frame of the

historical development of quite specific kinds of social relationship'. Ivor Goodson (1992) makes a similar point, arguing that in order to understand identity formation, stopping the analysis at the production of the life story is problematic. Life stories, he argues, are a person's interpretation of her or his own life (Goodson *et al.*, 2001). These narratives are the starting point for developing further understandings of subjectivity. Without this further work of putting the story in context, Goodson argues, the story is an individualising device that wilfully obscures collective circumstances, the social conditions of the production of the narrative. If, as Goodson (2005, pp. 213, 215) argues, the narratives we construct are drawn from a relatively small range of possible storylines in wider society, and then embellished with the personal, we need to deconstruct these narratives in order to understand how they are partly constructed by dominant discourses in society.

But we think that deconstruction is not enough. Following Bourdieu (2002), we argue that there is a further need to reconstruct these narratives in order to identify the links with wider societal discourses and social structures. This involves a process of interlinking individuals' narratives with other stories and documentary resources, of understanding identity, whether of place (including institutions) and people, as being produced at the nexus of movements within the domains of economy, culture, and politics – as 'articulated moments' (Massey, 1994). This builds on the idea of social formations (and transformations) being constituted through the articulation of heterogeneous elements. This understanding maintains the sense of durability and the immanence of social structure provided by Bourdieu's concept of habitus, and extends the improvisational nature of habitus, because it also focuses on the social, cultural, economic and symbolic forces at play within an arena of social practice. Therefore, on the one hand it focuses on the material conditions for the constitution of identities, but on the other hand, it stresses the contingent and historical location of identity formation, a recognition that identity does not fully escape the historical processes that have made that particular formation possible; it also holds out the possibility of there being other potential formations.

This implies a particular kind of narrative-based research and analysis. We propose a model that involves the collecting of narratives (interviews, policy texts, and so on), deconstructing these, then reconstructing them by interlinking different narratives, forming new, enriched narratives. This model views the narratives of interview transcripts and policy documents as 'bridging the gap between daily social interaction and large-scale social structures' (Ewick and Silbey, 1995, p. 198). It is one that views both the interview and the analytical process of deconstructing then reconstructing the narratives as a way of making explicit that which is implicit. This leads us to explore a methodological question as to how the immanence of social structure *in practice* is made available to us. If we are serious about investigating structure *in practice* then we have to go beyond the individual learner as the unit of analysis. In some ways the TLC project sought to do this by focusing on learning sites. We wish to suggest another method, of *habitus* as the unit of analysis. We understand the dispositions generated from within habitus as saturated with social structure. Habitus cannot be empirically researched without also mapping the fields of social practice and the resources available to people to construct their lives. Our methodological approach would therefore need to focus on the relations between objective social relations and social structure on the one hand, and the practices and accounts of real social actors, the agents, on the other.

Conclusion: Some research questions

In conclusion, to answer our central question: can adult educational research on learning and identity counter the individualising of neoliberal government policy that seeks to constrain educational 'choices' to those that contribute to government economic agendas?, we outline a series of possible research questions to frame research with adult learners. These questions arise from our analysis, earlier in this article, of the concepts of 'learner career' and 'learning culture'. We contend that these questions and the framing of these questions can build on the groundwork that has been established by this conceptual work. The questions are aimed at understanding the interplay between social structure and agency without suggesting a hierarchical relationship; in other words, our questions enable us to explore structure *in* agency through narrative-based research. Importantly, they are aimed at foregrounding the contemporary moment, which we argue is one of subjective and objective experiences of change.

In order to explore the construction of identity in relation to the changing nature of the relationship between education and work, and the nature of change in those fields, we would need to ask: how are local labour, education and training markets structured; and what relationship do particular learning sites and courses have to those markets – how are they differently positioned within the field? What are the social, economic and political forces that constitute local learning, institutional and vocational cultures? And what particular formations of labour markets and local education and training markets give rise to those particular cultures? We would want to explore the kinds of identity work that adults have to engage in, in the context of such transformations of the social fields they inhabit. What resources – social, cultural and economic – can and do people draw upon in this identity work, and how successful are they? Indeed, what would be the criteria for success? We would need to explore to what extent historically imagined communities, whether they be locational, classed, gendered or raced, still influence the emerging learner identities of adults entering PCET. We would want to explore whether participation in education, of whatever kind, is part of a reflexive project, of consciously transforming their identities. These questions are quite different from those posed by policy.

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Notes

- 1 The ESRC provides the largest funding for UK academic research. While it is an independent body it is financed by the government.
- 2 Post-1992 universities are higher education institutions which were formerly polytechnics. The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 gave these institutions university status. However, there is

a tendency for the post-1992 universities to be regarded as of lower status than the pre-1992 universities.

- 3 In a personal communication (11 February 2006) Helen Colley has suggested that this difficulty needs to be resolved empirically and in so doing it needs to deal with a particular problem, namely that consciousness and culture lag behind reality.

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