

A moment of reflection about the construction of knowledge in a post-modern research set-up.

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Abstract: Within the social sciences there has always been a tendency to divide ideas, concepts and thinkers in a binary manner. As such positivism is placed against symbolic interactionism, naturalism against anti-naturalism and so on. The positivistic approaches study the world as if it is confined within general laws, although this might be useful for analysis, it is not representing the complexities of the real world.

Since Malinowski's study of Trobriand society, ethnographic studies have become more differentiated and methods for data gathering, other than participant observation, have 'emerged'. Methodologies are borrowed from phenomenology to feminism and postmodernism. The reflections made in postmodern and critical ethnography are relevant for the study of power structures and their impact on every day life.

In this paper I will illustrate the impact of Foucauldian and Bourdieuan thinking for my own research. Using my own work in several deprived neighbourhoods in Cape Town I will show how studying the every day life of people can help to understand the underlying power structures of a given society, and more importantly, how the structure-agency dichotomy in the social sciences can be overcome.

Keywords: Foucault, Bourdieu, methodology, structure-agency debate

1. Setting the scene

The research for my doctoral thesis took me to the townships around Cape Town. I wanted to find out how housing projects, their configuration and organisation, influences the emergence and manifestation of social networks, and how and if, this is essential for an individual's social mobility.

The process the research went through, was one of an ongoing discussion between theory and empirical work, the work can be considered as ethnographic in nature. By trying to understand how people in their every day live try to cope with, and resist, the structural constraint and the cultural complexion put on them, post-modern ethnography highlights the question of power domination and resistance, it helps to overcome the divide between structure (often overemphasised) and agency¹. In ethnographic research the researcher tries to comprehend the lives of the group he or she is studying, with considerable attention for the historical, cultural and spatial context. Bourdieu and Foucault are sensitive about both context and power. Bourdieu's habitus and the exercise of symbolic violence and Foucault's

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conceptualisation of power and the aspects of normalisation and the regimes of truth are useful to bridge the gap between structure and agency. Before illustrating this with one example from the field, I will first briefly explain their concepts.

2. Linking the agent with structure using Foucault and Bourdieu

A. Foucault's concepts of normalisation and the regimes of truth

In 'The Subject and Power' Foucault states that "*The exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome*"². This doesn't imply the direct confrontation between two or more people but in fact it is about 'government', he points out that "*To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others*"³. For Foucault power is not something which is 'floating' above society, but which is truly anchored within our social realm. In 'Discipline and Punish'⁵ Foucault also elaborates over this 'modern power', to which each one of us is subjected. In our present society we all appear as some sort of dominated other (students, criminals, workers,..), subsequently this means that there is not just one centre of power, but that power is diffusely scattered throughout society^{5,6}.

Language is used to describe the objects or phenomena of our reality. But Foucault argues that these phenomena are not merely being described. Discourses are used to attach significant meanings to them. Consequently, discourses are also reproducing the social phenomena they "*talk about*".

For Foucault⁷ discourses are not "*a mere intersection of things and words*". He argues that the task we should set for ourselves

"consists of not - of no longer treating discourses as groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations) but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (emphasis added).

Foucault's interest in discourse is obvious, the relation with power and knowledge is clear. When we are cautious about the discourses that are present in a society we can understand the relations between the actors and the *regimes of truth* that are produced. Every society has its own *regimes of truth*: norms, values and discourses that are considered as legitimate ones, organising and normalising society and articulated by those who are regarded as authorised to do so. Thus discourses are able to (re)produce power relations. It is within this knowledge that we can understand why, in my research, the women, or the communities for that matter, are unable to

distinctively change their deprived positions. A much deeper/structural change is needed, or as Foucault⁸ phrases it:

“It is not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at present time”

My research was grounded in the knowledge that working from a rigidly framed definition of discourse, analysis will not be useful, instead discourse analysis is approached as a way to understand why people are talking (or acting) about certain things in a specific way. What is their motivation for doing so? Are there hidden assumptions that influence their thinking, which is then reflected in their speech? Discourse analysis is used to investigate if dominant norms and values get dispersed within the acting, within the *habitus* of certain groups, even if these norms are in fact oppressing them.

B. Bourdieu’s habitus concept and the exercise of symbolic violence

During socialisation a child absorbs the way society functions, as well as the norms and values that dominate it. The specific conditions a child is living in, and the experiences he will encounter in later life, will also leave impressions. A ‘mental structure’ will develop in every person’s mind, enabling them to understand the social world as it appears to them and to function within it accordingly. This is what Bourdieu calls the *habitus*. These cognitive structures operate on a subconscious level and facilitate our action and make *“possible the production of a common, meaningful world, a common-sense world”*⁹. As every person has an exclusive course of life, every habitus will also be unique, but it will always be a variation of the ‘modal habitus’ of a certain social group.

Bourdieu shows how the organization of society starts from objectivating the world through classification schemes, using dichotomies (eg. high/low, unique/banal, intelligent/dumb,...). For Bourdieu the source of these oppositions can be found in the separation between the elite and the masses. By speaking about others in a certain way, one does not only assigns a certain class to that other person but also assigns one to one’s self. These divisions are constantly being reproduced through language, education, cultural products, etc.. and through every day encounters and interaction.

The divisions, and thus the social order that derives from it, is being *“progressively inscribed in people’s minds”*¹⁰. Consequently they become practical principles, organizing our social world. At a certain moment the

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boundaries between the social structure and the mental structure in people's minds are becoming vague. Bourdieu stresses that at that point our experience of the social world becomes a *doxa*. People start to experience the society as obvious, thus "*the natural and social world appears as self-evident*"¹¹. As such the social order gets validated over and over again. This way, dominated groups in society, position themselves in the social hierarchy based on a classification system set up by the elite, they define themselves "*as the established order defines them, reproducing in their verdict on themselves the verdict the economy pronounces on them, condemning themselves to what in any case is their lot*"¹².

The elite in a society succeeds in superimposing their own way of thinking, their own cultural concepts on the majority of the people in such a way that this majority accepts this as the only legitimate one. In the mean time this elite also successfully conceals the power structure on which their supremacy is build. This is what Bourdieu calls *symbolic violence*. Bourdieu uses our education system to illustrate this.

In the next section I will use an example from my own research to show how housing and the meanings projected upon it can serve a normalising discourse to which people try to adhere (following Bourdieu's symbolic violence) and how these discourses serve to create docile bodies (following Foucault).

3. An example from the field

March 2007: In Freedom Park, a squatter settlement on the fringes of Cape Town, people are hopefully waiting for the houses that are going to be build for them. In April 1998, people from the surrounding communities, desperate for houses, illegally occupied an open field. Since then they have been engaged in a fierce struggle to acquire houses. But now the infrastructure works have started and by the end of the year the first houses will be ready.

Freedom Park is a very deprived community, half of the families living here have to survive on less than €2,7 per day (or R9600 a year). They can rely on charity from several churches, every week a priest comes to bring food for the people, and bones to make a pot of soup. Unemployment and the low schooling levels are serious problems, resulting in a downward spiral of deprivation, noticeable aggravated by the unhealthy living conditions. Several children have respiratory problems because of the life in shacks, which can be very cold and wet during winter. Four children have died due to the lack of appropriate sanitation and it wasn't until 2001 that government installed some chemical toilets, which have to be shared by the approximate 1500 residents of Freedom Park.

It is in this place that I spoke with Mary, a 36 year old women. After her divorce she is raising her three children by herself in the squatter

settlement. Her life isn't easy, she doesn't have a job and has to cover all cost with only the child support grant. I will use one of her quotes to illustrate how, starting from her daily life experience, information about the deeper societal structures can be gathered.

I have asked her how her life will look like, once she will be in her new house. She answered to me:

“It will be different, because then we will have to go work, pay our rents, it won't be as easy as it is now... At this moment it is easy, because there is no water to pay, no bills to pay. But then it will be different.. you will have to go work maybe ; you will have to make a different with your live, not like this... Then you will have the house and you will be proud and all that stuff. The children will be better. Because my oldest son he won't bring friends here because he is shy you know...”

The object of this quote is the house, the privately owned house around which a societal discourse is constructed. In the sentence above it is already clear how important the issue of home-ownership is, as suddenly you are classified in a different category, you become *proud, responsible...* And without actually saying the words as such Mary is contrasting this proud and successful person to the one who is not like this. This actually brings us to a crucial remark Foucault (1977) makes about the unspoken: “*The manifest discourse, therefore, is really no more than the repressive presence of what it does not say...*”. The implicit, hidden messages explain as much, or even more than that what is actually said. Mary explains that once she will be in the house she will be a proud person, she connects this pride with home-ownership but also with obligations. To be able to fulfil these commitments she will have to adhere to certain norms and values attached to the title. People externalise those norms through their individual actions, eg. painting the house, starting a garden, putting up a (picket white) fence... It is because of these small, daily activities that a societal discourse is being (re-)enforced. Thus here the normalising effect of ownership is being illustrated.

Another element Mary mentions is that *life is easy for the moment*. But she is not talking about the physical hardship, nor about the hunger they experience most of the time, she is actually talking about the lack of obligations towards a *normal* middle-class life. One might expect that more emphasis is placed on the physical difficulties and the improvements a *real* house would mean, but even in communities where the material conditions of live are completely insufficient, the symbolical layer of the house seems to get more attention than the mere physical one.

Mary places the hard life in the squatter settlement against that of a normal life in a proper house, which gives you pride in life. We should ask

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ourselves why she can only be proud when she will be in a house? Isn't the hard struggle something to be proud of? The answer has to be found in the societal discourse around the house and home-ownership (see fig. 1), which is also associated with values of family-life and child rearing, two goals people are striving for. As such great effort goes into achieving these goals, also financial efforts. By becoming a home-owner this woman will have to make sure there is money to pay the bills, she will have to step into the mainstream of society, complying with all its does and don'ts, trying to achieve a 'common people's live'. Making this choice, her options for radical behaviour and contestation of government's policies are being reduced. As such, people are not only submitting themselves to the dominant discourses (normalising themselves according to Foucault), they are also reaffirming them.

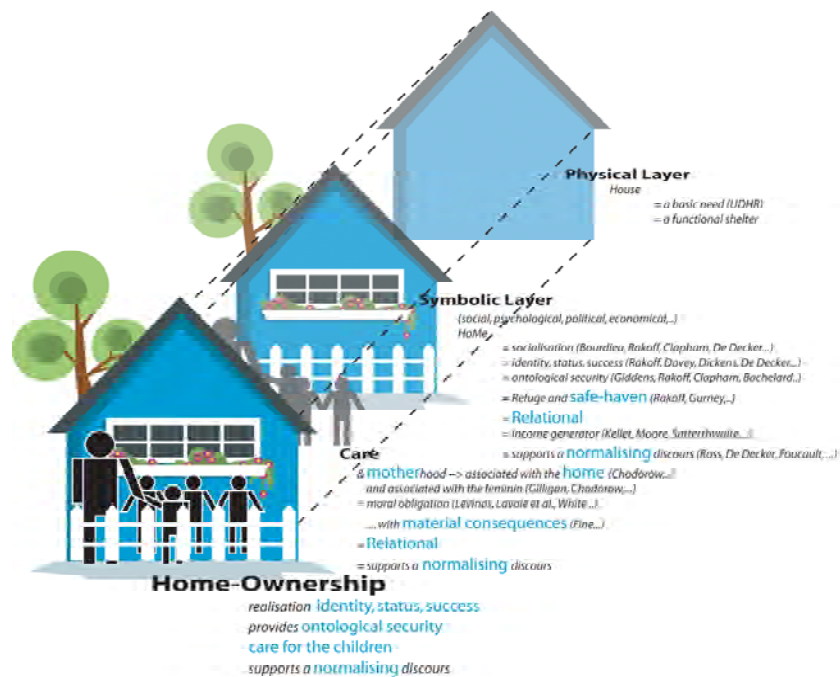


fig. 1: The multivocality of the housing concept

Mary doesn't question her striving for a *real house*, she accepts the meanings that have been attached to the house by a societal discourse, constructed by the elite of society. The meanings attached to the home are being projected into the lives of all people through popular media and TV.

Instead of questioning those images and the government policies that are used to enforce the discourse on housing, people are reaffirming it through their behaviour. The *regimes of truth* stay in place and marginalised groups are victims of *symbolic violence*, they try to adhere to an expected *normalised* lifestyle. To achieve this they have to comply to norms and values, they become submissive citizens, or *docile bodies*.

Using this one example I have illustrated how working from the micro-scale level, from the experiences of every day live, insights can be gathered about the deeper societal structure. A constant checks and balances between the theoretical concepts (in casu Foucault and Bourdieu) and empirical findings create a research climate in which the complexities of real life are not being abstracted into logical models or statistics. This allows us to generate a more complete (complex) knowledge of the functioning of our societies. It gives us the possibility to close, or at least narrow, the gap between both approaches in the social sciences, between the context and modern subjectivity.

4. To Conclude

A final question might need our attention, namely about the role of the intellectual. What can he or she do with the knowledge acquired through this interaction between everyday life experience and grand theories such as those from Foucault and Bourdieu?

I want to suggest, following Blommaert¹³, that maybe our task, as intellectuals, should be to see the linkages between diverse elements, to hold a broader view and to translate the voice of marginalised groups through analysing and questioning existing power relations, societal habits and individual's actions. Furedi also emphasised that "*being an intellectual requires social engagement*"¹⁴.

Notes

- ¹ Michael Peter Smith, 'Postmodernism, Urban Ethnography, and the New Social Space of Ethnic Identity', *Theory and Society*, Vol. 21, no. 4, 1992, pp. 493-531.
- ² Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, no. 4, 1982, p. 789.
- ³ *ibid*, p. 790.
- ⁴ *ibid*, pp. 789-790.
- ⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (Pantheon; New York, 1977), pp. 86-87.

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- ⁶ G. Gutting, *Foucault: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press; Oxford, 2005).
- ⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Routledge; London, 1972).
- ⁸ Michel Foucault, 'Truth and Power', In: *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* by Michel Foucault. Colin Gordon (ed.) (Pantheon Books; New York, 1980), p. 133.
- ⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Harvard University Press; Cambridge, 1984), p. 468.
- ¹⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 466-475.
- ¹¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 1977), p. 164.
- ¹² Bourdieu, *op cit.* p. 471.
- ¹³ Jan Blommaert, 'Het verraad der klerken', (Indymedia; 2007).
- ¹⁴ Frank Furedi, *Where Have All the Intellectuals Gone? Confronting 21st Century Philistinism* (Continuum Press; London, 2006).

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