

Reflections on interviews: Official accounts and social asymmetry

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In this paper, we will describe and discuss the methodological implications of selected elements of the writings of Pierre Bourdieu. More precisely, we will describe and discuss methodological implications regarding the relationship between researcher and informant, in an attempt to elucidate the material significance of Bourdieu's epistemology. We will primarily address the relationship between researcher and informant through interviews, but believe the discussion and arguments is relevant also for other methodological approaches. Two levels of asymmetry between researcher and informant will be discussed; one pertaining to the specific act of the interview and one pertaining to a structural asymmetry surrounding it; the latter relating to an invisible but significant distance between researcher and informant, placed differently, for instance, in a social hierarchy. An empirical focus is directed towards the study of health care services, addressing how 'official accounts' can affect what is presented and (mis)represented. We argue that *the interview* is not an isolated incident, and should not be seen as an exercise limited to the tape-recorded conversation. *The interview* presupposes the researcher's experience, rigorousness and dedication, in addition to a theoretical intake. Furthermore, we argue that certain methodological implications associated with official accounts and misrepresentation are particularly applicable to research within the field of health care services.

Keywords: Interviews, methodology, symbolic violence, misrepresentation, social asymmetry, Bourdieu

An interview

It was a good interview, the researcher thought; the interviewee gave reasonable, factual and very clear responses, answering the questions dutifully and to the point. The interviewee stayed true to his ascribed role as an interviewee, answering the questions and elaborating when asked to do so. He spoke clearly and calmly, taking his time, pausing in reflection to find a suitable phrase. When challenged by the researcher, he would sometimes reflect on the implications of his positions, but he quickly ended such 'digressions', and returned to providing more factual and to-the-point statements. Still, the interview proceeded differently than expected, the researcher reflected mid-way, not so much as a tête-à-tête conversation, but still informative. Getting close to the end, the researcher reflected that the interview was going rather well, that the various topics on his

note pad could be ticked off as 'completed', and that his preparations with the guide seemingly had worked out according to plan. The interview had not led to 'revolutionary new discoveries', but had rather confirmed many of his own ideas.

To assist him in keeping the flow of the interview, the researcher had used a tape recorder. He could therefore pay attention to his guide, follow the various opportunities provided by the interviewee during the interview, and try to make it 'an actual conversation'. Or so the researcher thought. When thanking for the interview and turning off the tape recorder, a remarkable change occurred. The interviewee immediately changed his physical posture and demeanor; he was not sitting up as straight, but leaned towards the researcher with a more informal pose. The interviewee, on his own accord, started to elaborate on a previously discussed topic, but did so in a fashion completely different from before. He was now far more relaxed, he used different, more everyday phrases, in longer, less structured sentences, talked faster and in a more impulsive manner, and he gestured with his hands. He was also more critical than he was during the official part of the interview. A veil had been lifted, the researcher immediately reflected.

Introduction

The researcher may *think* he gets the interviewee's 'true story', whereas what the interviewee provides is really something else; to put it crudely, one might say that the interviewee in this interview seems to give the answers he believes to be correct or in agreement with what the researcher expects to hear. It is almost as though he follows a script, and as though he is playing a part in which the researcher plays his antagonist. It is only when the tape recorder is switched off that the interviewee steps out of his role.

In this paper, we will discuss the relationship between the researcher and the informant against selected elements of the writings of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. More precisely, we will discuss the methodological implications of Bourdieu's epistemology, having interviews as a point of entry, and the cited example as an illustration to help us along the way. A main objective is to clarify the complexity embedded in Bourdieu's methodology, primarily addressing students but also researchers and academics. By highlighting the relationship between researcher and informant, and the potential distance between them, we will also venture into the epistemology of Bourdieu, unable, as Bourdieu himself, to completely separate the dimensions (Bourdieu, Chamboredon and Passeron 1991).

In particular, we will discuss the relationship between the two roles against the concept of asymmetry. Two levels of asymmetry between researcher and informant will be discussed; one pertaining more directly to the specific act of the interview, producing more or less practical implications for the researcher, and one pertaining to a structural asymmetry. Discussions will lean on Bourdieu's concept of 'official accounts', and will simultaneously have a particular empirical focus; the study of

health care services. The initial example from an interview is, we believe, illustrative of some of the challenges the social science researcher can face when conducting interviews, and will be revisited towards the end of the paper. Still, the example does not cover all or even most problematic aspects related to interviews, nor does this paper in its entirety: Focus will be directed at how ‘official accounts’ and understandings of these can affect what is presented through an interview, thus also affecting how an interviewee is represented and potentially misrepresented by the researcher.

Finally, we argue that certain methodological implications associated with official accounts and misrepresentation is particularly applicable to research within the field of health care services. Within this field, the presence of doxic representations can be seen as particularly dominant, potentially creating a divide between researcher and interviewee, not necessarily comprehensible for the researcher.

Understanding interviews

The topic of the relationship between researcher and informant is addressed in different ways throughout Bourdieu’s authorship, more often than not combining methodological, epistemological and theoretical discussions, based on the premise that these are, in their very essence, interwoven (Prieur 2002, 109). The matter of how the researcher should proceed in his/her interactions with an informant, technically and otherwise, is seldom discussed explicitly. A rare exception is to be found in the concluding chapter of *Weight of the World* (Bourdieu 1999), in which the topic of interviews and conversations between researcher and informant is raised and problematized (see also Callewaert 2002). However, Bourdieu gives a stern warning about relying dogmatically on the great number of textbooks on ‘methods’ and ‘interview techniques’ available; a universal menu of techniques is not Bourdieu’s ambition. While these can be useful in describing potential effects that the researcher unintentionally can produce, they still miss the larger issue; the subtle strategies of social agents. The textbooks rely too heavily on ‘outdated’ methodological principles, according to Bourdieu, wherein established and preferred scientific traditions are represented, and therefore reproduced.

What then, should the Bourdieuan researcher do, and how should she proceed? In part based on the complex and encompassing concept of ‘habitus’ (see for instance Bourdieu 2012, 76-87; Bourdieu 1990, 52-79) - we can surmise that a general undertaking of the researcher, for Bourdieu, is to speak of the social world in a more authoritarian fashion than what is evident in the minute accounts of his/her informants (Bourdieu 2003, 288). While this position has been widely criticized, primarily for its elitist premise – regarding the ability of the researcher to access a space hidden and unavailable to any other – its methodological implications are, we argue, still of value. To uncover or lay bare that which is beyond the evident, is a significant undertaking for researchers within a reflexive sociological framework (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Petersen and Callewaert 2013), implying that the researcher must look for more than that which informants, based on a set of habitual

dispositions, manage to express explicitly. The researcher must, therefore, base her assertions on more than what is readily available; on more than the minute reproduction of the accounts of informants, for instance.

This does not imply that informants' statements and expressions are of small value for the researcher, but rather that they should not be taken at face value, as an objective portrayal of a social reality, nor should they be treated as such by the researcher. Transferred to interviews, this implies that the objective of the researcher is not to be considered as an act of extracting the most 'correct' or 'genuine' statements. Statements from informants do not contain all that the social scientist is looking for (seen in relief against ethnomethodological and phenomenological approaches); she must look further (Prieur 2002, 113), making the interview a matter of more than the very act of interviewing.

The social science researcher must, writes Bourdieu, come to terms with the inescapable fact that all relationships, also the relationship between the researcher and the informant, is a *social* relationship, in which agents have different positions and (total/acquired and composition of) capital, leading to different positionings within a given field. It must therefore be an invariable goal to attempt to avoid the inherent *asymmetry* within such a relationship. Within the researcher-informant relationship, the researcher is superior by definition, but should apply herself to doing his/her uttermost to reduce and avoid taking advantage of the implicit and explicit situational social superiority (Bourdieu 1999). However, the good intentions of the researcher will not suffice; the social relationship between researcher and informant is invariably structured in such a way that the relationship is influenced by both parties' situational position regardless the researcher's intentions. Such structural disparities must also be addressed, according to Bourdieu, as they can otherwise form the premise of not only misunderstandings, but also *misrepresentation*. We can, in other words, surmise two levels of asymmetry; one related to more practical and one to more structural matters, both influencing how a research interview transpires and the outcome of it for the researcher.

First, we will address the more or less practical aspects of an asymmetry between researcher and informant. Following Bourdieu, we claim that the researcher must recognize and make *specific* attempts at remedying the asymmetry in the interview. In our understanding, this can and should be done in three phases (note that Bourdieu does not himself make such an explicit distinction): 1) in preparing the interview, 2) during the interview, 3) when analyzing the interview. In the following, we will primarily focus on the two former, while the latter, dealing with the analysis of the interview and the textual representation of it (see Bourdieu 1999, 621-626), lies outside the scope of this paper.

Preparing for interviews

Before the actual interview, the researcher must take rigorous steps to be as prepared as possible regarding, but not excluded to, the relationship between the researcher and informant. First and foremost, the researcher must recognize that she

is the one in charge, the one who creates the rules of the game, often without negotiation (Bourdieu 1999), to be able to make necessary adjustments. It is therefore essential to provide the informant with adequate and sufficient information about the setting, including the objectives of the research. The informant should be informed, but also made at ease with the situation, not only with regards to the specific context of the act itself (where, when, who), but also with regards to clarifying the respective roles and the overall objectives (why this informant, why this research project, and so on).

One can argue that Bourdieu here indirectly addresses general scientific principles connected to transparency (from researcher to informant) and integrity (on behalf of the researcher), not only as universal features of scientific endeavours, but also as instruments in bridging the distance between researcher and informant. Bourdieu also purposes further steps to amend the social distance between the two roles, steps that from a methodological standpoint appear to be more inventive, while also contributing with a complexity rarely present in methodological textbooks. The social asymmetry is, it is argued, also related to distance in capital between the two agents, especially with regard to cultural capital (linguistic capital is mentioned as a particularly significant example) (Bourdieu 1999, 609). At times, therefore, the very structure of the relation must be addressed: one must consider who the participants are vis-à-vis one another. Bourdieu therefore recommends a form of ‘matching’ (our term) between researcher and interviewee, to decrease the inherent situational structural disparities between the parties. However, to be able to alter the composition of the agents and therefore to remedy a distance in capital, the researcher or the research team needs sufficient knowledge and information in advance of conducting the interview, for instance about the interviewee. This information should not only be in the form of biographical data about the person in question, but also include knowledge of and a form of familiarity with the social position of the interviewee. She must also have knowledge of and experience from ‘the field’ in which the more or less specific research area is embedded, and not simply about the individuals who are positioned there (Bourdieu mentions, for instance, that the approaches selected for *Weight of the World* were the culmination of 40 years’ work, and of an ongoing collaboration among 25 researchers) (Bourdieu 1999). Bourdieu argues that such ‘background information’ (our term) is essential, not only related to the process of considering a ‘matching’ between researcher and interviewee, but also to remove inappropriate or irrelevant questions (see “symbolic violence”, later).

With this, an important, yet complicated aspect of the interview situation is raised; the aspect of social proximity and familiarity. By ‘bridging the gap’ between the two agents, for instance through recruiting and training particularly appropriate researchers, even the most “brutally objectifying questions” can become non-threatening and non-aggressive (Bourdieu 1999, 611), because there is a form of underlying shared understanding of the meaning and implications of the questions. One can afford to be rude to an equal, but not to a subject, in other words. A practical

illustration of this may be found in *Weight of the World*. To level the asymmetry between researcher and interviewee, Bourdieu and his research team recruited and provided training to a researchers ‘in close proximity’ to interviewees, for instance a young researcher from the same part of Paris, with a similar social background and roughly of the same age as the young man the team wanted to interview. However, even when researchers have a strong awareness of the social asymmetry between the agents, it can never be fully neutralized (Bourdieu 1999; Callewaert 2002). Yet it remains the researcher’s task to attempt to make the asymmetry as imperceptible as possible.

Another warning is also raised: by recruiting researchers close to the interviewee, for instance an unemployed researcher with training in interviews, interviewing an unemployed interviewee, one can ‘go too far’. Several of the interviews in the referenced research project were discarded as they offered little but linguistic data (Bourdieu 1999, 612), perhaps because of too much symmetry and a consequential tacit understanding between the parties; the researcher and interviewee often left important aspects unspoken as part of their mutual understanding of each other as peers.

Performing the interview

The preparatory stages of *the interview* is, in other words, far more complex and demanding within such an approach, than suggested in typical methodological textbooks. The steps suggested in preparation for interviews relates to a first form of asymmetry between researcher and informant (Bourdieu 1999); the researcher is in charge and has power to define the situation. The other asymmetry relates to a social asymmetry between researcher and informant, who are differently placed in a social hierarchy. While this asymmetry cannot be removed altogether, the researcher can and should make attempts at minimizing the effects of it, that is, to reduce the symbolic violence that is inevitably exercised in a research interview (Callewaert 2002, 218).

Symbolic violence may be understood as “the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 167); it is a tacit form of violence, executed to the detriment of a social agent without his/her knowledge, and indeed often unrecognized even by the agent who executes it. In this context, where we address methodological issues, symbolic violence is a relevant aspect to discuss because it pertains to *misrepresentation* on behalf of the researcher, a misrepresentation of words, meanings or of social phenomena. The researcher can, according to Bourdieu, exercise symbolic violence over a subject explicitly (but unwittingly) by asking insensitive questions or by conducting interviews in a unsuitable setting, or implicitly (and still unwittingly) by misrepresenting the subject, for instance by ascribing a different or more theorized meaning to a statement from an interviewee, as a form of “scholastic fallacy” (Bourdieu 1990). Symbolic violence can thus be viewed as an exercise in distortion. However, Bourdieu’s symbolic violence does not pertain to deliberate distortions by the researcher;

rather the subject is unwittingly – by the subject and by the researcher – misrepresented. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, therefore, pertains to more than the mere good will and intention of the researcher.

To reduce the potential for misrepresentation, as much as possible, Bourdieu suggests an “exercise in active and methodical listening” (Bourdieu 1999, 619) *during* the actual interview. Such an approach requires, it is further argued, a detailed and thorough understanding of the social mechanisms that influence the categories individuals are a part of, and not merely knowledge of the specific individual. Through the process of addressing social disparities between the agents, as described, an interview can be constructed (in a conceptual sense) in which the researcher can demonstrate a reflex reflexivity based on a feel or an eye, to be exercised on the spot (Bourdieu 1999, 608). As such, the objective is to develop a scientific practice that seeks to be methodological and reflexive (Bourdieu 1999, 608), without being a pure application of a method (again in contrast to the classical handbook in methodology).

Bourdieu proposes, in other words, a form of surrender on part of the researcher; the researcher should attempt a form of “controlled imitation”, which can, to some extent, be a spiritual and not only an epistemological/theoretical exercise (Bourdieu 1999, 614). What he describes is a form of “forgetfulness of self”, which can be as difficult as it is significant, Bourdieu warns. By mentally placing oneself in the place of the other, the social asymmetry between the parties can be addressed (without being eliminated). One must, argues Bourdieu, try to achieve a “generic and genetic comprehension” of who the individuals are, based on a theoretical *and* practical understanding of the social conditions they are products of (Bourdieu 1999, 613).

While hardly very specific practical advice for the researcher, and keeping Bourdieu's warnings against methodological textbooks in mind, we are perhaps nevertheless one step closer to understanding Bourdieu's methodological position, or at least his thoughts on the act of conducting an interview. Callewaert, in an analysis of the very chapter in *Weight of the World* to which we have referred above, offers another by elaborating on Bourdieu's discussions.

Callewaert argues that the exercise of understanding the position of the interviewee is not about a form of immersion where the researcher can share the experiences of the interviewee (Callewaert 2002, 322). Rather, it is a mental exercise of placing oneself in the position within a social space of the interviewee, more than it is an obliteration of the social distance between interviewee and researcher (Callewaert 2002, 322). This is an exercise quite different from the phenomenological exercise of projecting oneself through ‘the other’, in Callewaert's view (Callewaert 2002, 322). The exercise Bourdieu recommends is, therefore, neither a matter of the scientific act of measurement (which Bourdieu addresses explicitly with regards to questionnaires), nor of an anti-scientific emotional fusion between the two agents (Callewaert 2002, 313), but it remains a scientific exercise.

A warning is also given: such an approach can be demanding as it presupposes a form of adaptation towards the preconditions of the interviewee, rather than to those of the researcher. It is, he argues, an extremely challenging scientific exercise, where, on the one hand, one must be as prepared as possible in order to secure theoretical relevance throughout the interview, and, at the same time, one must be adequately flexible and adjusted to the uniqueness of the specific interview (Callewaert 2002, 318).

If this challenging scientific exercise is properly addressed by the researcher, the researcher can offer the interviewee an “exceptional situation for communication, freed from the usual constraints (particularly of time) that weigh on most everyday interchanges” (Bourdieu 1999, 614). This, again, does not only concern scientific rigorosity, but also the act of providing interviewees with opportunities, in a safe ‘space’, to be understood literally and figuratively.

Social asymmetry and “official accounts”

Returning to the initial interview and attempting to understand the peculiar effects demonstrated in it, we can juxtapose it to the methodological considerations described and discussed so far. The researcher (unwittingly, it should be added) followed several of the previously discussed elements pertaining proximity, particularly with regard to familiarity between the participating agents. The interview was part of a research project concerning health care institutions, in which the researcher (the first author) conducted fieldwork at various institutions, primarily combining observations and interviews. Observations were made to inform the interviews in the sense that an initial interview guide was drafted after a first period of observation. The interview in question was the first of many, and the interviewee was carefully selected. He was, like the researcher, male, and approximately his age. He, the interviewee, also held a position of some authority and had experience within his field, and was considered knowledgeable in addition to generally being amicable, in the view of the researcher.

In short, the interviewee was carefully selected, interviewee and researcher had conducted several conversations in advance; they shared certain traits and had knowledge of each other’s work and positions. Yet, the apparent familiarity between the two did not allow for a form of conversation, or of “an exceptional situation for communication”.

This can, in part, be explained by the researcher’s inexperience. Although considering proximity between the two, the researcher still treated the preparation somewhat haphazardly, as something far less important than the interview itself. The researcher did not prepare himself (aside from making a coarse interview guide) or the interviewee, with regards to how the objectives of the research project related to the interview, leading, we believe, to a form of asymmetry in expectations and roles. The researcher trusted the already established rapport between the two to be sufficient to secure a social interaction containing more than set answers from the interviewee. Most importantly, the researcher was not able, during the actual

interview, to interact with the interviewee: he was perhaps too self-absorbed within his own role as ‘interviewer’ and too occupied with the interview guide to pay attention to the development of the interview, leaving the interviewee’s interpretation of his expected contribution unchallenged.

These methodological inadequacies on part of the researcher notwithstanding, we believe that we cannot fully explain how and why the interview transpired as it did solely based on them. To understand the mechanics of this particular interview, we need to temporarily leave Bourdieu’s methodology and look deeper into his epistemological/theoretical writings, particularly on ‘official accounts’.

Retracing our steps, Bourdieu points to three aspects of ‘official accounts’ for which the researcher should be cautious (Bourdieu 2012, 18-19):

- ‘A discourse of familiarity’, in which the informant will omit central aspects which are ‘taken for granted’ – i.e. that which is internalized and which therefore remains undisclosed.
- ‘An outsider-oriented discourse’, in which the informant tends to generalize and simplify, in part to adjust to the researcher as an outsider.
- ‘A semi-theoretical disposition’, in which the informant expresses himself in quasi-theoretical terms in an attempt to impress and/or demonstrate knowledge.

‘An outsider-oriented discourse’ does not seem to characterize the interview in question. ‘A discourse of familiarity’ could, potentially, have influenced the interview as it did in the referenced examples from *Weight of the World*, but the interview did not develop into a ‘discussion among peers’ in which important elements were taken for granted. Rather, we will argue that a ‘semi-theoretical disposition’ characterized the conversation. The interviewee appeared to define a role for himself, in part as a ‘leader’, in part as a ‘spokesperson’ (for the institution or for the sector). The answers, and thus the conversation, had an air of ‘answering the questions correctly’, of the interviewee being ‘in the right’, while the researcher did not grasp the position the interviewee took. The interviewee was therefore able to, without resistance, maintain his position throughout the interview. Perhaps paradoxically this had the effect of impressing the researcher along the way, giving him the impression that the interviewee had all the answers, without leaving him with more than ‘official accounts’.

The break, when the tape-recorder was turned off, marked the end of the ‘official account’ and of the ‘semi-theoretical disposition’; the interviewee did not feel the need to stick to the discourse, thus changing the mode of the conversation as the formal part of it was now technically and officially ended. As such, we will argue that the shortcomings of this particular interview is related not only to social proximity between the agents, but to a more complex form of structural asymmetry, leaving the researcher incapable of balancing ‘a theoretical relevance’ on the one hand, and being ‘flexible and adjusted to the uniqueness of the specific interview’

on the other. The researcher was not able to steer the conversation away from the narratives imparted by the interviewee; he did not realize until the end that the ‘construction of the interview’ was primarily done by the interviewee, and did not manage to break with the official character of the interview. After the tape-recorder was turned off, a noticeable change took place: a change in posture and ‘body control’, a change in language, but also a change in what was communicated. The interviewee moved away from the ‘official account’ mediated through a semi-theoretical disposition. At the drop of the veil, the non-official ‘official account’ was made official for the researcher.

Why then, may one ask, was the semi-theoretical discourse particularly dominant in this case, and which methodological and epistemological insights can be drawn from this? To discuss these questions, we need to address the overall context of the interview, but also to retrace our steps even further into Bourdieu’s epistemology.

As previously discussed, studies relying on interviews often succumb to an ‘epistemological pitfall’ by basing the primary source of information about ‘the social’ merely on pure *expressions* of the social. By contrast, in the world of Bourdieu, habitual dispositions govern agents’ practices and perceptions, without explicit (self)realization of it doing so, thus also influencing, in complex and even paradoxical ways, the mediations of an interview. We will argue that within the modern health care services, in which this particular interview was conducted, shared habitual dispositions are prominent and manifest themselves as *doxic representations*; representations of ‘institutional life’ that to a large degree are both taken for granted and not explicitly discussed or made ‘official’. The modern health care services constitute, in other words, a social space in which agents operating within it develop a peculiar form of “homogeneity of habitus”; “(...) what causes practices and works to be immediately intelligible and foreseeable, and hence taken for granted” (Bourdieu 1990, 58). The health care institution represents an arena, in other words, in which shared habitual dispositions, can be contained, thrive and reproduced. Furthermore, we argue that the boundaries (understood literally and figuratively) of the health care institution, contribute to maintain shared habitual dispositions in an excessively ‘official’ form, without being officially discussed or approved. Within this particular empirical world, embedded within a field of health care, ‘official discourses’ constitute particularly strong, undisputed renditions of ‘reality’, in other words. These can take the form of doxic representations which are not only shared, but remain largely within “the universe of the undiscussed” (Bourdieu 2012, 168-169). As such, representatives of the official can be just that, *representatives*, without either intent or knowledge of being so. The health care institution is, in other words, an incumbent of a form of veiled sentiments, perhaps stronger here than in comparable contexts, such as Bourdieu’s informants in *Weight of the World*.

Official accounts, such as those expressed in the interview, are therefore not only a general concern for the social science researcher, but can be particularly dominating element within the field of health care, articulated through a form of a ‘semi-theoretical disposition’. The modern health care services as an empirical object of study, of which there naturally are many variants, constitute an institution in a literal sense, and an institution in the sense of being positioned within a field of health care, which it simultaneously is a representative for (see for instance Petersen and Callewaert 2013; Ågotnes 2017). This field is closely connected to the public sphere, regardless of ownership status of the literal institution (a private, for-profit nursing home, for instance, is also, in this sense, a representative of the public sphere). This manifests itself in many ways, of which we can only briefly outline a few here: Social life for patients/residents may to a large degree be limited to the institution where they stay/live. Similarly, work-life for staff is confined by walls and structures, and any institution is permeated with recognizable, hierarchical and largely taken for granted division of labour and responsibility. Furthermore, the practices of the staff at a health care institution bear the characteristics of everyday routines; the staff perform similar tasks every day, at the same time, with the same people. The institution, then, constitutes a recognizable social entity/space for agents operating within it (be it a researcher or staff members), bearing considerable shared sentiments within it. Consequently, lifting the veil of ‘official accounts’, becomes a demanding but also significant task for the researcher operating within this field.

This creates opportunities for the researcher, as the object of study can be found and observed within certain specific and comprehensible boundaries. The researcher can relate to these boundaries in a reasonable fashion, and can conduct fieldwork within specific physical environments that can be accessible at any given time, are understandable for its agents, and can be easily communicated to the world outside. But it also creates certain challenges of a methodological and epistemological nature, as illustrated through the example.

The science of construction

It should be noted that the researcher used the interview to make changes in subsequent interviews. The inexperienced researcher gradually realized the shortcomings of the interview and the situation in which it was embedded. This realization came after the sudden break when the tape recorder was turned off, and was strengthened at a later stage, when he was analyzing the interview, and again at an even later point, when he was revising his interview guide and conducting subsequent interviews. As such, the sited interview can be illustrative of an argument also voiced by Bourdieu: the interview is not an isolated incident, and should, from a methodological standpoint, not only be seen as an exercise starting at the beginning of an interview and ending when the last word has been spoken. For Bourdieu, this is not simply about techniques or even methodology, but is also concerned with the very foundation of the endeavour of the social sciences, and the construction embedded

in it. *The interview* is a challenging exercise in which the researcher must not only be prepared, but also constantly vigilant, flexible and reflexive. Furthermore, *the interview* presupposes experience, rigorousness and dedication on the researcher's behalf. It presupposes that the researcher has extensive knowledge, but perhaps also that she performs a preparatory study in advance of an interview (Callewaert 2002, 322), as well as initial conversations with her interviewee. Lastly, *the interview* is not necessarily one take. *The interview* is, in addition to the actual interview a) a thorough preparatory phase, b) initial conversations with the interviewee, c) discussion of conversations or initial interviews in a team of researchers, and d) possible re-runs of an initial interview with potential changes in for instance settings, compositions and interview guides.

Despite these in our opinion important aspects of the researcher-informant relationship, Bourdieu himself offers little concrete methodological advice. The few practical methodological pieces of advice we have found, have been presented in this paper. Others have been 'drawn out' from Bourdieu's epistemological writings by us, as implications of a theoretical and analytical position, in an attempt to make Bourdieu's complex and oftentimes unspecific (with regards to practical applications) discussions relevant for students. Still, a 'book of recipes' to be universally applied is not to be found. Rather, addressing social asymmetry in an attempt to avoid symbolic violence, is, for Bourdieu, the most pertinent task *in itself*. The real danger, warns Bourdieu, is representing, and thus reproducing, a science in which the inevitable effects of the inevitable construction of the research subject is not adressed (Bourdieu 1999, 608).

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