

THEORY AND METHOD IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

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Series Editors: Jeroen Huisman and Malcolm Tight

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THEORY AND METHOD IN HIGHER EDUCATION
RESEARCH VOLUME 4

THEORY AND METHOD IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

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Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2019

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78769-278-7 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-78769-277-0 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-78769-279-4 (Epub)

ISSN: 2056-3752 (Series)



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CONTENTS

<i>List of Contributors</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Editorial Introduction</i>	<i>xi</i>
 Using the Sociology of Basil Bernstein in Higher Education Research	
<i>Michael Donnelly and Andrea Abbas</i>	<i>1</i>
 A Probabilistic Approach to Studies in Higher Education	
<i>Adriana Perez-Encinas and Jesus Rodriguez-Pomeda</i>	<i>19</i>
 Refocusing Threshold Concepts: Surfacing and Attending to Student Misconceptions as a Necessary (and Safer) Form of Liminal Learning	
<i>Melinda Lewis, Jason M. Lodge and Rosanne Quinnell</i>	<i>31</i>
 Creativity and Playfulness in Higher Education Research	
<i>Nicole Brown and Jennifer Leigh</i>	<i>49</i>
 Capturing Hybrid Institutional Logics in Higher Education: Qualitative Document Analysis as Methodological Approach	
<i>Jarrett B. Warshaw and Stevie Upton</i>	<i>67</i>
 Globalisation and Differentiation in Higher Education Systems	
<i>Frans A. van Vught, Marijk C. van der Wende and Don F. Westerheijden</i>	<i>85</i>
 Exploring the Complex Social Spaces of Higher Education: On the Uses and Challenges of Geometric Data Analysis and Topological Approaches	
<i>Fabian Mundt and Kenneth Horvath</i>	<i>103</i>
 Methodological Tracks to Study Research Collaboration Networks in Higher Education	
<i>Denise Leite, Isabel Pinho, Célia Elizabete Caregnato and Bernardo Sfredo Miorando</i>	<i>125</i>

Longitudinal Peer Network Data in Higher Education <i>Jasperina Brouwer, Ellen Jansen, Andreas Flache and Adriaan Hofman</i>	145
Casting the ‘Net’ in Autonethnography: Exploring the Potential for Analytic Autonethnography as an Emerging e-Research Methodology <i>Lyz Howard</i>	163
Practice-focused, Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology in Higher Education Leadership Research <i>Sal Jarvis</i>	189
Human and Social Capital and Their Application in Higher Education Research <i>Malcolm Tight</i>	209
The State of the Art of Higher Education Research on Flanders <i>Bruno Broucker, Jeroen Huisman, Jef C. Verhoeven and Kurt De Wit</i>	225
<i>Index</i>	243

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EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

This is the 2018 volume in the annual series *Theory and Method in Higher Education Research*, which we launched in 2013 in the belief that there was a need to provide a forum specifically for higher education researchers to discuss issues of theory and method. So far, we have published around 75 chapters.

In this volume, there is a somewhat greater focus on methodological issues, but there are a couple of chapters engaging primarily with theory (or a mixture of theory and concepts).

Amongst the chapters focusing primarily on theory, Donnelly and Abbas discuss key concepts of Basil Bernstein's theoretical work, Van Vught et al. develop system differentiation theory, Lodge and Lewis address the threshold concept literature and Tight discusses the use of the concepts of human and social capital in the higher education literature.

In terms of method and methodology, contributions consider topic modelling (Perez-Encinas & Rodriguez-Pomeda), network analysis (Leite et al.), document analysis (Warshaw & Upton), geometric data analysis (Mundt & Horvath), creativity and playfulness in research (Brown & Leigh), autoethnography (Howard), grounded theory methods (Jarvis) and longitudinal network analysis (Brouwer et al.).

We also included a chapter that took stock of research carried out on higher education within a relatively small country (Broucker et al.).

The international nature of researchers' interest in theory and method is clear with authors being based in Brazil, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, the UK, the US and Portugal.

Anyone interested in contributing a chapter to a future volume is invited to get in touch with either, but preferably both, of the editors.

Jeroen Huisman
Malcolm Tight
Series Editors

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USING THE SOCIOLOGY OF BASIL BERNSTEIN IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

Michael Donnelly and Andrea Abbas

ABSTRACT

Basil Bernstein's theoretical ideas have been called upon by far fewer higher education researchers than would be expected. We argue that the international higher education field of research is ripe for further application of Bernstein's theoretical ideas. Through reference to our own and that of others, we illustrate five key affordances of Bernstein's theoretical framework. First, it provides a unique approach that leads researchers to pose formerly unthinkable questions and encourages the development of new knowledge to address them. Second, Bernstein's valuable concepts raise questions about the specific but inter-related macro- (societal), meso- (organisational) and micro- (individual) level processes involved in producing (in) equalities. Bernsteinian analysis can help to identify how inequalities emerge from and can be addressed at these levels. Third, we contend that the approach encourages empirical exploration of the ways in which education may be disruptive of the social order. Fourth, we suggest Bernstein's concepts can be adapted to capture the complexity of intersecting inequalities in a way that allows the object of analysis to determine what inequalities are foregrounded. Finally, we argue that concepts help to orientate questions around inequality and social justice in a way that does not over-determine answers.

Keywords:: Basil Bernstein; intersectionality; social justice; macro-meso-micro; pedagogy; curriculum

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we identify how Bernsteinian concepts have shaped and benefited our own and others' research processes and identify benefits of applying his work. Bernstein's (1971, 1973, 1975, 2000) conceptual lineage provides international higher education researchers with a potentially illuminative theoretical and methodological framework. Compared to other dominant social theorists, there is a much smaller body of work, mostly South African, Australian and British, that has applied and developed Bernstein's oeuvre in higher education research (e.g., Ashwin, 2009; Buyl, 2016; Case, 2011, 2013; Ensor, 2004, 2006; Luckett, 2009, 2012; Maton, 2004; McLean, Abbas, & Ashwin, 2017; Shalem & Slonimsky, 2010; Shay, 2011, 2013). It has been argued that when his work has been applied, it is rarely integral to the process of analysis, with researchers often 'mentioning him in passing' (Power, 2010). Some see difficulties in the applicability of Bernstein's conceptual ideas to the diverse dimensions of real social problems (Power, 2010). The difficulty of his language and the abstractness of his concepts have also been perceived as ambiguous and vague, which results in the details of institutions being 'glossed over' and left to the reader to fill in (Atkinson, 1985, p. 22). Power (2010) has discussed the difficulties in her own research and Dowling's (2009) in matching data to Bernstein's theoretical concepts. Bernstein himself left much of the work of applying his theories to his research students. Where there is no empirical evidence, he gives examples of the 'kinds of things' he is referring to. His students' empirical work tended to be in schools, and it was in limited international contexts. However, some higher education researchers have found Bernsteinian concepts useful for explaining specific aspects of inequalities and to supplement other theoretical approaches (e.g., Case, 2013; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010). Whilst Bernstein's conceptual ideas are challenging, we and a growing body of other authors argue that their abstractness provides scope for applying them to a wide range of social phenomena.

In this chapter, we focus on five affordances of the approach. First, we suggest that the idea of 'boundaries', which is so central to Bernsteinian thinking, offers the opportunity to envisage formerly unthinkable questions and facilitates the opening up of new knowledge in addressing these. Second, fully embracing Bernstein's oeuvre and its methodological implications leads researchers to generate insights into the relationships between macro-level social processes, meso-level institutional factors and micro-level individual experiences. Third, Bernstein's framework facilitates identification of the ways in which education is and/or may be disruptive of the social order. Building on this, the fourth affordance is the potential of a Bernsteinian framework to capture intersectionality in a way that allows the object of analysis to determine what inequalities are foregrounded. Finally, we suggest that a Bernsteinian approach has helped to ethically orientate our questions towards issues of equality and social justice without determining our answers. Using Bernstein to guide our methods and methodological approaches towards rigorous and multifaceted descriptions of educational phenomena offers a level of neutrality and transparency to the research

process. This is especially important if we are to advance knowledge in areas of higher education where new insights are needed to solve long-standing problems, for example, in challenging current understandings of educational quality (McLean et al., 2017). Each of these five affordances is explored with reference to our own and others' empirical work. We begin by exploring the usefulness of Bernstein's notion of 'boundaries'.

'Boundaries'

Bernstein's analytic frame guides us towards the 'hidden curriculum' and an ethnographic approach to research that can capture richer and more comprehensive accounts of educational relationships. The notion of 'boundaries', which is so central to Bernstein's thinking, comes from the idea that knowledge is not neutrally ordered or transmitted but instead carries a hierarchical order and structure in its transmission. More specifically, boundary *strength* refers not to the content of knowledge but to the relation of contents to one another, and the degree to which it stands in open or closed relationship – stronger boundaries indicate more separation between contents, whilst weaker boundaries refer to less separation. When content is strongly bounded, a very clear message is carried about its distinctness, whereas weaker-bounded content conveys messages of *similarity* rather than *difference*. Importantly, the degree of boundary strength signifies whether the identity associated with it is important: strongly bounded content makes a very particular kind of identity explicit. The abstractness of the idea means it can be applied at a variety of conceptual levels to understand a multitude of phenomena. For example, Walford (2007) used the ideas to understand what counts as an 'interview' in ethnographic research.

The notion of boundary strength was an especially illuminative concept in Donnelly's (2014, 2015b) study of 'school effects' on higher education participation in the UK. In the UK, students tend to make their university applications via their schools, which co-ordinate their submissions to the central university application processing centre (UCAS). The study sought to understand how schools shaped young people's thinking around their future, including whether or not they should progress to university and their choice of university. It was based on research carried out in the UK, in four case-study schools located in South Wales, which were purposefully sampled for differing rates of higher education participation. A range of ethnographic methods were deployed to capture the mundane aspects of school life, including observation, analysis of documents, as well as in-depth interviews with students and teachers. The research aimed to capture the routine ways that schools presented post-school choices, particularly their social construction of the higher education system.

Using Bernstein's notion of 'boundaries' to examine the routine ways in which schools presented higher education enabled an analysis of practices that unintentionally and consciously differentiated between universities. Differentiating between the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge (collectively referred to here as 'Oxbridge') and others was particularly significant. Previous researchers have understood 'school effects' on higher education participation in terms of the

volume and level of knowledge schools provide about universities, including ‘information, advice and guidance’ (Reay, David, & Ball, 2005). Stark differences exist between schools in their provision of higher education preparation, including their differing levels of esoteric knowledge about universities like Oxbridge (often held by those who attended these universities and who can be found on the staff list of private schools). A Bernsteinian lens showed how important it was to look beyond the *volume* of higher education preparation provided to examine more closely the hidden messages carried within support activities (Donnelly, 2014, 2015a). This avoided the assumption that being silent on Oxbridge (which is often the case in schools with more disadvantaged intakes) had no effect. Also it revealed the impact of the implicit messages sent by not drawing differentiating boundaries around universities on young people’s engagement with higher education choices.

Bernstein’s idea of ‘boundaries’ enabled Donnelly (2014, 2015b) to see how these more subtle and hidden messages from schools marked out ‘Oxbridge’ as distinct from other universities. Distinguishing ‘Oxbridge’, making explicit who *is* ‘Oxbridge material’, became powerful institutional forces that contributed to the shaping of young people’s choices. Boundaries, communicated through support activities that marked out a specific ‘Oxbridge’ identity, were socially divisive. Strong boundaries, where schools marked out who is, and implicitly is not, ‘Oxbridge’ reinforced identities of students who thought they might be Oxbridge, encouraged some to apply who may not have done otherwise and closed down possibilities for others. When boundaries around an Oxbridge identity were weak, there were also mixed effects on students’ sense of their future options. The idea of ‘boundary strength’ was useful in teasing out the very subtle ways in which schools ‘opened up’ and ‘shut down’ the possibility of Oxbridge. Importantly, these ‘school effects’ were evident across schools with differing socio-economic compositions. Bernstein’s idea of ‘boundaries’ enabled the analysis to go beyond surface-level descriptions of what schools did, to capture the subtle, yet very powerful, effects of their activities. Indeed, the implicit and hidden nature of messages made them more powerful. It helped to clearly identify how familial experience and knowledge of higher education interacted with the ways in which schools presented the higher education system to shape students’ choices.

Bernstein’s sophisticated language of description clearly captures hidden messages sent out by educational curricula and institutions, but his theoretical contribution can pose challenges because of the dominance of *transmission* and *receipt* in his model. Bernstein’s oeuvre is demanding because we need to understand transmission *and* how messages are received, ignored, integrated or rejected by individuals. Learners may not receive messages which schools send out, and different groups of learners may receive or interpret implicit and explicit communications differently. Learners may resist or negotiate messages consciously or unconsciously: it can be challenging to capture and account for this degree of complexity. At the same time, Bernstein (2000) himself always intended for his theories to be put to work in order to develop them further to address these sorts of issues.

Macro-, Meso- and Micro-Level Processes

A range of conceptual frameworks can be used to explore macro-, meso- and micro-level processes. However, a key affordance of Bernstein's framework is that his concepts encourage an exploration of each of the levels and the relationship between them. The significance of this characteristic to Bernsteinian thinking is considered here in relation to Abbas and colleagues' project (funded by the Economic and Social Research Council; Grant Number: RES-062-23-1438), which was conceptualised and designed to test and develop the value of Bernstein's concepts in understanding and developing strategies to ameliorate inequalities: the inter-relationship between macro-, micro- and meso-processes is integral to this (Abbas & McLean, 2007; Ashwin, Abbas, & Mclean, 2015; McLean et al., 2017). The study focused on how inequalities between students from diverse backgrounds arose or were interrupted by studying university first degrees in sociology departments of different status. As Singh (2015) suggests, Bernstein's approach helps to identify the level of action needed for improvements.

Bernstein's central concept of the code refers to processes and phenomena that operate at different levels of society. Codes are ideas, actions, thoughts, behaviours, rules, etc. that are created in interactions, shape our understanding and consciousness and are passed on through every form and channel of social interaction: created through boundaries described earlier. For example, in relation to universities, the terms pre-1992 university and post-1992 university have come to stand for institutions that, in the UK, are associated with higher- and lower-status students who have different capacities. Divisions are visible in codes that operate at *micro-level* in assumptions about the skills and capacities that academics assume students will/will not have. In *meso-level* organisational phenomena, they are visible in curriculum documents which assign different identities to students in universities of different status. At the *macro-level*, they are evident in national and international league tables which rank universities and disciplines. Hence, understanding whether a discipline generates codes that facilitate greater (in)equality requires insights into universities of different status at these levels.

The Pedagogic Quality and Inequality in University First Degrees Project was designed to capture data at each of the levels. The analysed data sets we generated are listed under the level they largely represent in Table 1.

Data are ambiguously positioned in relation to the levels as it can change for different aspects of the analysis. For example, the videos of classes represent the *meso-level* that constitutes our understanding of departmental/institutional provision. However, they also illustrate *micro-level* pedagogic discourse. Similarly, interviews with students and life-grids convey individual *micro-level* experiences, but, thematically analysed, these experiences also generate broader social processes relating to class, gender and so forth. For example, individual men and women students choosing sociology embody the micro-processes that together generate the emergent force associated with the gendering of a discipline (in this case sociology as female). Also, students who do not read for seminars form the (*meso-level*) institutional context which other students are unhappy with.

Table 1. The Analysed Data Sets Mapped onto the Macro-, Meso- and Micro-Levels.

Macro: National and International Context	Meso: Institutional and Departmental Provision	Micro: Students and Staff's Perspectives, Interactions and Experiences
Reviews of existing literature and media representations	University and departmental websites and documentation relating to university, departments and programmes	98 life-grid interviews (see Abbas, Ashwin, & Mclean, 2013 for description and analysis of the value of this method)
133 policy documents (national and international)	16 interviews with seminar tutors and key informants	98 interviews with first-year students
National and institutional statistical data	12 videos of teaching	Case-study interviews with 31 students in their second and third years
	Ethnographic notes	Analysis of students assessed work in their first, second and third years (62 pieces of work)
	A two-hour focus group with key informants from each institution discussing first-year assessed work	Survey of 759 students
		Short telephone and email interviews with 12 case-study students after graduation

Source: Reproduced from [McLean et al., 2017](#).

Nonetheless, it is helpful to understand how the analysed datasets constitute a particular level and how this relates to others.

Bernstein also provides concepts such as the *pedagogic device* which demand attention to the relationship between the *macro*, *meso* and *micro*. The pedagogic device is the mechanism by which sociological knowledge, produced historically by researchers in the field of production (*macro-level*), is *recontextualised* into sociology curricula through institutional processes (*meso-level*) and through decisions and actions by teachers and students in classrooms (*micro-level*). In the research in question, the *pedagogic identity* associated with sociology students at different institutions was analysed in terms of how it is produced by these three different levels. The *macro-level* was explored through bench-marking documents and writings about the history of sociology (see [McLean et al., 2017](#)). Its recontextualisation at the *meso-level* in the four sociology departments and institutions of different status was explored by analysing curricula content. At the *micro-level*, we explored how the different curricula had affected personal and intellectual change producing institutionally inflected pedagogic identities ([Abbas, Ashwin, & McLean, 2016](#); [McLean et al., 2017](#)).

Authors such as [Shay \(2015\)](#) have also illustrated the value of this approach in examining how the different forms of knowledge provided by various

university curricula give students access to different identities and degrees of empowerment. Drawing upon Muller (2014), she argues that *macro-level* forces generated within fields of employment, academic disciplines and so forth combine with *meso-level* institutional factors and *micro-level* classroom interactions to shape curricula. The varying power that these different levels and sub-fields within them have in institutions affects whether students are empowered to create new knowledge through encountering disciplinary lenses that can change practice or whether their degree focuses on their gaining the capacity to do what employers require of them.

One of the shortcomings of Bernstein is that the differential power that causation at *macro-*, *micro-* and *meso-levels* might have is not conceptualised. Critical realism, as expounded by Sayer (1992) and Archer (2000), is arguably stronger in being more specific about the relative difficulty of changing *macro-*, *meso-* or *micro-level* practices. For example, in our analysis of the influence of feminist knowledge, we found that female students were more likely to be transformed by such knowledge if there were more feminist academics and where feminism was organised into separate modules, which is perhaps unsurprising. However, there is a question of whether it would be tackled by simply getting any academics to teach feminist knowledge in separate modules: a *meso-level* solution. A critical realist perspective would have suggested we explore whether feminist academics were a *necessary* feature of a department where students were transformed through feminist knowledge. If this were the case, then this is arguably a *macro-level* problem about women, academia and knowledge which may be harder to resolve.

Nonetheless, Bernstein (2000) has importantly focused the attention of academics on the selection and sequencing of knowledges and texts as a way of understanding how knowledge is unequally distributed across society and as a way of identifying more egalitarian possibilities (McLean et al., 2017).

Giving Voice to Curriculum and Pedagogy

In affording equal credence to the different levels of analysis (macro, meso and micro), the third affordance a Bernsteinian approach holds can be found in its ability to explore empirically the ways in which educational systems and institutions have the potential to be disruptive of social order. Of course, the extent to which education is a disruptive and emancipatory force is questionable, with the consensus of opinion holding that education is reflective of dominant groups in society and is a force of social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1990). However, Bernstein's contribution here is to give pedagogy and educational institutions more of a voice in theorising educational inequalities. In this way, he was approaching things from a very different perspective and offered a valuable alternative voice to that offered by theories of social reproduction. Key to this alternative viewpoint was the idea of understanding how educational mechanisms are configured and structured in relation to the family, with the implicit implication that they might be *reconfigured* to disrupt the status quo (in an ideal world).

This was clearly evident in [Donnelly's \(2016\)](#) analysis of the impact of widening participation interventions at an elite UK university. This qualitative project sought to examine the impact of 'outreach' activities led by UK universities. 'Outreach' activities are run by universities targeting predominantly school-aged children and young people, with the aim of widening participation to ensure their intakes represent a broader social spectrum. Globally, higher education continues to be dominated by the most advantaged social groups, and this is especially the case at high-status universities where the research was carried out. The research drew upon a case-study of a research-intensive university in the UK (defined here in terms of those consistently ranked highly in league tables) based in the north of England. As well as generic 'outreach' programmes, the research examined a number of subject-specific programmes targeted at secondary school children (aged 11–18) for the university subjects architecture, law, 'STEM' (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and social sciences, each of which runs for two years, as well as medicine and dentistry which both run for seven years.

These subject-specific outreach programmes are a series of activities aimed at widening the social intake to the specific university subjects they cover. Generally, across all the programmes, there are several key aims which include raising awareness and knowledge of higher education study and the professions (e.g., knowledge of student finance, content of degree courses, how subjects are taught and assessed and the professions), addressing low 'aspirations', increasing levels of confidence, improving attainment as well as supporting students to complete their university application form. A qualitative approach was adopted, which involved in-depth interviews to gather the experiences of 36 young people between the ages of 16 and 18 who were in full-time education and at the same time took part in one of these programmes. In addition, a focus group was held with 10 parents of the participants.

Using Bernstein's framework, especially his ideas around sources of consensus and disaffection in education, it was possible to see here how the nature of these initiatives engendered a new kind of engagement by the students. The students who took part in these initiatives lacked knowledge and understanding of what Bernstein refers to as 'expressive' and 'instrumental' orders of education. These concepts capture not only images of conduct, character and manner (expressive) but also the acquisition of specific skills and knowledge (instrumental). Hierarchical, sequencing and pacing rules govern the transmission of these two orders and explain the logic of the message system. The concept of hierarchical rules refers to the establishment of social order within an educational setting, for example, manifested in the social construction of 'student' and 'teacher'. Sequencing rules specify the order and pace by which knowledge is acquired and taken on by the learner. Criterion rules dictate the criteria learners are expected to take on and master, for example, ideas about what is 'appropriate' to mention (and not mention) in an application or interview for a university place. In the UK, interviews at Oxbridge often include abstract and vague lines of questioning with the expectation of certain kinds of responses ([Spedding & Welsh, 2010](#)). These responses are judged against a set of criterion rules – what

the Oxbridge interviewers consider ‘appropriate’ forms of thought, expression and style. Expressive and instrumental orders, together with the rules that govern their transmission, capture the educational institutions’ underlying message system, knowledge of which necessitates successful engagement of the student, but is unequally held by all groups within society. Bernstein’s framework is unusual here in its attempt to pick apart the components that make up educational curricula and institutions.

This provides one theoretical perspective about how inequalities are maintained, illustrated by a plethora of research revealing the ways in which dominant groups in any given society disproportionately hold knowledge and a kind of cultural assimilation with educational institutions. At the very same time, the framework offers the potential to see how a change at the institutional level, in terms of the nature of the institutions’ expressive and instrumental orders, could concomitantly result in a change in the student’s engagement in the university. It offers the potential (theoretically at least) for how universities may disrupt social order – through changing the *system* (not the student). Viewing the outreach activities from a Bernsteinian perspective, it was possible to see how they were an attempt by the institution to expose the hidden rules of social order within the setting, in terms of the nature of the universities’ expressive and instrumental orders. In other words, it attempted to inculcate knowledge and understandings about modes of behaviour, conduct and manner of university students, as well as the kind of learning and knowledge acquisition that takes place. Importantly, through matching participants with current university students from similarly disadvantaged backgrounds, the widening participation interventions helped the participants to identify with being a university student, as illustrated by the following accounts of those taking part in the law/architecture outreach schemes:

Tina: Yes, university is one of those things where you know you want to go but it’s, kind of, just outside your reach. You know, like myself, I don’t really know many people that are at university or anything like that, so I didn’t really have anybody to talk to about it or anything like that, but, coming here, you see students and they’re working and they’re doing things and you’re talking to them, you really[...]

Beth: You wonder if you can fit in or not.

James: I feel, like, ‘cause at first, I thought I was like, if I ever did go to university, I’m like, ‘well I’m a bit of an outsider. You know, I’ll never fit in or anything’, but now that I’m here and I’ve seen the students, we’re like them.

Tina: Just us, but a couple of years older.

Martin: It makes it more like, ‘this is more achievable really’, when you see the real people that are working here.

Data extracts taken from [Donnelly \(2016\)](#), p. 14

Whilst these students represent exceptional cases, against a backdrop of significant inequalities in higher education (especially at the most elite universities), the framework offered by Bernstein shows how these dominant trends can be disrupted, at least theoretically speaking. It offered a potentially illuminative

framework for evaluating and understanding the impact of educational interventions which are aimed at addressing the unequal participation of social groups.

Capturing Intersectionality

The fourth affordance pertains to the way that Bernstein can be adapted to analyse intersectionality. The term intersectionality ‘moves beyond understanding social hierarchies either in isolation from one another (e.g., gender as separate from race) or in an additive manner (e.g., gender plus race equals greater disadvantage). Instead, it highlights social categories (such as gender, age, class and race) as mutually constituted and intersecting in dynamic and interactive ways’ (Larson, George, Morgan, & Poteat, 2016, p. 965). People who are categorised as belonging to one of these groups may have pleasant or disadvantageous experiences that can be attributed to different aspects of their status. For example, in the Pedagogic Quality and Inequality Project, older students and those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds had experiential affinities with sociological concepts that enhanced their learning and personal development. Also, some middle-class students experienced discomfort because sociological concepts highlighted how their successes were shaped by their privileges.

Bernstein (1971, 1973, 1975, 2000) and his followers primarily explored how class codes permeated formal pedagogic settings through the mechanisms of classification and framing. Subsequently, researchers have developed Bernstein’s framework to take account of gender codes and ethnic/race codes (Arnot, 2002). However, this work often prioritises gender or class and positions intersecting differences as modifying or mediating a main code, which according to the definition earlier does not constitute intersectionality. Weiler (2012) suggests that Bernstein needs adapting to analyse how schools produce advantages and disadvantages through race, gender and class identity. In the Pedagogic Quality and Inequality Project, we explored elements of difference individually and then the emergent effects of intersectionality for individuals. The rationale was a need to understand the complex independent effects of each variable and their inter-relationship with others. For example, coming from an ethnic minority background impacts on how students experienced universities: commonalities across groups were important. However, in individual lives, all the elements of difference, relevant to an individual, are experienced simultaneously and have a mixture of effects.

Therefore, we included cross-sectional analysis across the datasets regarding each of age, class, disability, ethnicity and gender. Hence, we could see that students from black and minority ethnic backgrounds saw their backgrounds as significant to their experience and their understanding of sociological knowledge. However, this was shaped by institutional context: for example, in one university, most students (regardless of ethnic background) appreciated the variety of students’ cultural backgrounds as positively shaping their experience and the outcomes of their university education. When we open-coded interviews, life-grids, curricula, policy documents, videos, etc. for each of these codes, we did it in a way that we could always identify cross-cutting codes though NVivo searches and in SPSS analysis of quantitative data. This allowed us to explore

evidence of gender, age and so on effects across datasets. The emergent effects of all relevant codes on individual students' lives were apparent through biographical case studies and qualitative interviews over the three years. Hence, one ethnic minority student's severely impaired sight was foregrounded in his accounts of his experience in getting to and being at university. Another female student's experience of being an ethnic minority student was shaped by being a mother to a severely disabled child and her dyslexia.

Arnot (2002) describes how she moved away from Bernsteinian approaches in order to take into account the aspects of difference and inequality that we have tried to develop insights into by adapting Bernstein's concepts. Instead, we have tried to adapt Bernstein's ideas to contemporary contexts and to take into account theoretical developments in sociology and to make them relevant in contemporary and different national contexts (McLean et al., 2017).

Orientation to Issues of Equality and Social Justice?

Adopting a Bernsteinian approach has encouraged a line of questioning that includes having an ethical orientation to issues of equality and social justice. It encourages a deep interrogation of every aspect of education, including the underpinning values and ideas, without pre-judging outcomes. This is a critical methodological advantage if new approaches and framings of problems are needed to develop knowledge to address long-standing social issues (Abbas & Spacey, 2016; Donnelly, 2016). In the sociology of education, dominant theories often conceptualise educational practice as embodying and manifesting cultural domination of society for the perpetuation of capitalism. Whilst Bernstein's framework also illuminates these processes where they are present, his concepts offer a more neutral stance towards differences. For example, Singh (2001) illustrated how within the Samoan community adults and young people interrelated differently to the ways in which adult teachers related to students. This demonstrates how the social relationships (which are not necessarily always class-based) can be the important intervening variable in shaping inequalities. Similarly, in Donnelly's (2016) study of university-led widening participation interventions, the kinds of knowledge and understanding potential applicants to university are expected to take on ('expressive' and 'instrumental' orders, referred to above) were not necessarily out of bounds for the excluded groups. Indeed, the participants took on these understandings unconstrained by their class identity. This illustrates how a social reproduction lens can limit our analytical capacity in terms of our starting points and guiding questions. Beginning with the assumption that knowledge is not necessarily class-based, and can be accessed by all groups, allows for a broader line of questioning. Bernstein helped to describe the data rather than pre-judge it. Also, Singh (2015) and Donnelly (2016) demonstrate how Bernstein's framework can analyse what is wrong with education and suggest ways of improving practice and inequality.

The term 'pedagogic rights' has guided authors to frame their understanding of what students gain from education with a concept of social justice (Vitale & Exley, 2016). It has mainly been used in the context of more wealthy countries.

Table 2. Bernstein’s Pedagogic Rights. Adapted From Bernstein (2000, p. xxi).

Rights	Conditions	Levels
Enhancement	Confidence	Individual
Inclusion	Communitas	Social
Participation	Civic discourse	Political

In poorer countries, the capabilities approach, critical pedagogy and social justice frameworks have been more widely used. However, pedagogic rights are helpful in encouraging researchers to include analysis of pedagogy, curricula and students’ lives in evaluating whether the education system is giving students access to knowledges and identities that give them the potential to participate in, contribute to and transform society (McLean et al., 2017). There are three pedagogic rights which are represented in Table 2.

The three rights are nested: the first is a necessary pre-condition of the second and so forth. The first right, *enhancement*, entails experiencing intellectual or personal boundaries, as when we encounter ideas, values or practices which challenge our preconceptions and previous experiences. Individual enhancement and confidence are gained when these are taken as an opportunity to gain ‘critical understanding’ and to identify ‘new possibilities and new opportunities’ for the future (Bernstein, 2000, p. xx). For example, when ethnic divisions are recognised as social phenomena that can be changed through new social arrangements. Knowledge is central to gaining pedagogic rights and *enhancement* though it forms the necessary basis for *inclusion*, which is achieved through a formal or informal social position whereby individuals experience *communitas* by holding a role in which they can apply the new understanding and knowledge that grants enhancement. The third right, *participation*, refers to individuals being able to alter the world, to change ‘practice’ and ‘outcomes’ and participate in the ‘construction, maintenance and transformation of the (political) order’ (Bernstein, 2000, p. xxi). Pedagogic rights can be understood as a prerequisite for a more democratic and just society because it is only achieved if all members of society are empowered through knowledge to play a part in the process of constructing, maintaining and transforming the social order.

The Pedagogic Quality and Inequality project is the most thorough-going example of how pedagogic rights conceptualises and shapes an approach to social justice. The research was underpinned by the assumption that giving students a high-quality university education was an issue of social justice and that this could be conceptualised in terms of whether they gained access to pedagogic rights (McLean et al., 2017). However, here we give an illustration of how the concept of pedagogic rights has been used to re-orientate the questions and analysis of a case-study from a project that was not initially shaped by a Bernsteinian approach. The case-study drew upon and developed the work of the Postgraduate Experience Project (PEP), STEM (from hereon, the project is referred to as the PEP project). PEP explored ways that universities were/were not supporting successful progression into postgraduate-taught master’s study in

STEM disciplines and then into employment. The project allocated fees scholarships to students studying in 11 universities and evaluated their impact on the students and their success. In this project, the notion of success was conceptualised in terms of whether learning prepared students for jobs in the local, national and/or international economy. [Abbas and Spacey \(2016\)](#) developed a small case-study which instead considered whether students were gaining access to pedagogic rights.

The broader PEP research undertaken in 2014–2015 explored the effects of fees scholarships (provided by funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England) from the perspective of students, university staff and employers using a series of six surveys with students, focus groups with students, an analysis of the national survey of students studying taught post-graduate courses in the UK (known as PTES) and a survey of employers. These perspectives were compared across the 11 institutions in relation to a selected range of postgraduate-taught STEM programmes with a view to discovering how to make successful adjustments so that universities could serve the needs of employers and job-seeking students ([Wakling, 2016](#)). Reframing the study using pedagogic rights instead led us to ask (1) whether students were gaining access to knowledge that allowed them to encounter intellectual or personal boundaries through which they could envisage new possibilities in relation to their field; (2) whether through their courses they were accessing formal or informal social roles that enabled them to apply their new-found knowledge; and (3) whether the contexts of employment or society they gained access to through this knowledge would allow them to intervene and make material differences to the world in which they worked.

To understand this, we needed to re-analyse the existing datasets and results and to add additional qualitative methodologies. For example, biographical interviews with nine students followed by one-hour interviews about the programme allowed us insight into how post-graduate-taught STEM courses fitted into their plans and the role the knowledge they acquired was expected to play. An analysis of programme documentation, including the curriculum and knowledge content, and a two-hour focus group with tutors gave us insight into the pedagogic device, and how and why particular knowledge was selected in relation to programme teams' understanding of what students needed, their relationship with employers and the effect of state intervention via fees scholarships on students' experiences and outcomes. An analysis of university strategy through documentation, interviews and field notes also allowed us to explore how the university perceived its role in local employment development.

The Bernsteinian-inspired approach leads us to ask what students are expecting, why they are expecting it and how does this relate to their gaining access to pedagogic rights. For example, through the biographical approach, we learned that students had a variety of complex aspirations even on a small course. Students chose individual courses often because one or two modules would provide them with the type of knowledge they wanted to progress in their chosen careers or because they could get funding. Most students gained access to

individual enhancement and some students experienced inclusion (mostly through extracurricular activities), but for others part-time employment prevented this.

Concluding Remarks: Towards a Bernsteinian Approach

Higher education research is ripe for a Bernsteinian analysis and we have explored here through our own application of his work, and that of others, five key affordances it can bring. The notion of 'boundaries' brings sharp analytical clarity to the examination of educational issues. The power of this idea can be found in its ability to elucidate all of the unspoken, taken-for-granted and hidden dimensions which can act as powerful structuring mechanisms. The focus on the macro-, meso- and micro-results in ensuring that we understand research into students in higher education in terms of how their experiences are both shaped by, and themselves produce, broader social processes. Hence, it ensures we take into consideration the wide-ranging consequences of inequities in higher education and encourages realistic thinking about what needs to be done to ameliorate this and at what level.

By providing a highly sophisticated language of description to understand pedagogy and educational institutions, a Bernsteinian approach allows for the possibility to understand the exceptional cases of education as a disruptive force. This affordance is critical if we are to advance understandings about how issues of equity in higher education participation and outcomes might be addressed in the future. Whilst existing theories of social reproduction provide excellent understandings about how the status quo is maintained, they often lack the theoretical power to generate knowledge about how it might be disrupted, a void which Bernsteinian thinking might well fill. The concept of pedagogic rights enables us to have a view of what type of changes in higher education would benefit who and ultimately broader society and democratic processes. Developing Bernstein's codes to reveal the effects of different intersecting advantages and disadvantages allows us to map out how, for different people in varying contexts, structural forces shape experiences and have diverse consequences for individual lives and institutions.

The hallmark of a Bernsteinian approach is an appreciation of pedagogy, curriculum and knowledge and educational institutions as agentic factors in and of themselves – as Bernstein asserted in his own words:

It is often considered that the voice of the working class is the absent voice of pedagogic discourse, but [...] what is absent from pedagogic discourse is its own voice [...] It is as if the specialized discourse of education is only a voice through which others speak. Bernstein (1990), pp. 165–166.

We consider this orientation to be central to taking a Bernsteinian theoretical approach. However, Bernstein himself thought it was important that his concepts did not overshadow our investigation and interpretation of the social world. He suggested that the external language of description (that provided by our data) and the internal language of description (that provided by the theoretical

frame) should be kept separate initially to allow the data to speak and allow us to develop his conceptual framework (Ashwin, 2009; Bernstein, 2000). Hence, like other researchers, we have used his concepts to build and develop our own sense of a new and evolving context. There is much capacity to use Bernstein's theory to shape methods and questions and to still produce significant conceptual and theoretical development. At the core, using Bernstein's theory as method involves taking a detailed and close-up examination of higher education and looking at it in relationship to society, taking a layered and nested approach but giving equal credence to these different levels. In contrast to looking at how societal forces shape higher education, a Bernsteinian approach might look to understand how society shapes, and is shaped by, higher education. The potential application of this approach across different empirical areas is enormous. Whilst our own work has considered issues around curriculum, pedagogic rights and inequalities in higher education participation, other avenues to take with a Bernsteinian lens could include addressing contemporary issues of higher education and civil society, 'research impact', 'internationalisation', neoliberalism in the academy and the nature of competition. Whilst Bernstein's concepts and theoretical framework may be difficult to grasp, only through experimenting with their application can greater clarity and accessibility be achieved.

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