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# Doing youth participatory action research (YPAR) with Bourdieu: An invitation to reflexive (participatory) sociology

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## Abstract

Recent years have seen an increased epistemological and methodological interest within sociology in participatory research. Seen as one mode by which to upturn the apparent antagonism between ‘town’ and ‘gown’, and as a pragmatic way to render sociology more ‘public’, participatory research seems to offer resolutions to some of the field’s more pressing recent concerns. It also appears to provide redress to continuing institutional pressure to establish ‘impact’ for our research. This article offers a close and theoretically informed examination of the assumptions and practices of youth participatory action research, or YPAR, in order to contribute to deepened disciplinary understandings of the possibilities and limits of participatory approaches. Framed by the reflexive sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, we draw upon cross-national conversations through which we have intentionally reflected on moments of ambivalence or discomfort in our own participatory research practice(s). We utilise these to engage critically with some recurring problems in YPAR, suggesting these also have relevance to sociological enquiry more broadly. Our collaborative process of mutual reflexivity, developed through walking and talking together, writing individually and then providing feedback and clarifications, has allowed us to deepen our understanding of the power dynamics at play in participatory sociological enquiry.

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ambivalence, collaborative research, community-based research, methodologies, power, reflexivity

**Introduction**

Participatory action research, or PAR, emerged as a challenge to dominant positivist paradigms of research in the 1970s. Colombian sociologist Fals Borda, credited as one of the founders of PAR, sought to ‘challenge . . . the relation between knowledge and reason’ and introduce an ‘explicit valuing of practice and action as revealing their own sources of truth rather than simply being secondary to logic and theory’ (Balakrishnan & Claiborne, 2017, p. 186). PAR aims to unseat the authority of the researcher-academic and to privilege the knowledge of ‘individuals and groups who are directly affected’ (Jordan & Kapoor, 2016, p. 138). Like PAR, youth participatory action research, or YPAR, ‘is an approach to research in which those most impacted by a problem – the youth – co-research it and take action in partnership with adults’ (Bertrand et al., 2017, p. 142).

As PAR and YPAR have become more widespread in health studies, nursing, education, social work, child and youth studies, anthropology and sociology, important questions have emerged about whether projects being labelled ‘participatory’ remain aligned with PAR’s original radical roots (Jordan & Kapoor, 2016); whether academics are being sufficiently reflexive about reproducing stigma through their PAR practices (Janes, 2016); and whether there is empirical evidence to support the claims that young people benefit from their involvement in YPAR (Jacquez et al., 2013). PAR and YPAR are rooted in forms of resistance to the neoliberalisation of knowledge production in higher education institutions, attempting to ensure that research is directed and owned by the collaborating communities. However, in practice, any academic-involved research is beset by structural and contextual pressures such as funding requirements, time pressures, and in the UK by the particular viewpoint on impact developed by the Research Excellence Framework (Back, 2018; Wood, 2014).

It is thus imperative, in our view, that YPAR scholars develop a sophisticated conceptual grounding for the effects of power and domination. This article argues that Bourdieu’s theoretical corpus provides reflexive tools which respond to these challenges, thus better enabling community-engaged PAR to redirect practice towards resisting structural inequalities. We came to these insights at the start of a new research collaboration, through a process of walking, talking, writing, reading and responding that allowed us to become co-researchers for each other, in order to better understand our own distinctive forms of research praxis in the shared field of YPAR. As scholars who have each worked with marginalised young people over more than two decades – particularly with those who are homeless or precariously housed – we have encountered moments in participatory research projects that raised important dilemmas about power, inequality, and the sometimes conflicting impulses we face whilst in the field. We were keen to understand how such dilemmas might be avoided or resolved in future work. We demonstrate how relational and movement-based methodologies for scholarly reflection that engage with

Bourdieu can provide important reflexive insight, an approach which may be relevant to academics seeking to redress the inequalities in their research practice.

YPAR scholars have a strong tradition of emphasising the importance of identifying and working with the dynamics of power that emerge in research relationships (Askins & Pain, 2011; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Torre & Fine, 2008). Many accounts of YPAR provide concrete examples and offer guidelines or heuristics for tackling power differentials (Dentith et al., 2009; Mirra & Rogers, 2016; Mitra & McCormick, 2017). Drawing on the work of feminist Latinx scholar Gloria Anzaldúa (Torre & Ayala, 2009), some YPAR scholars have described the coming together of participatory researchers, young people and others involved in projects as ‘contact zones’ which ‘invite [. . .] a textured understanding of human interaction across power differences’ (Torre & Fine, 2008, p. 25). Askins and Pain (2011, p. 806) suggest that ‘relating to the research context as a contact zone . . . necessitates working with and through issues of voice, agency, power, and desire *alongside* all participants in the process’. While sympathetic to this framing, and recognising within it some core truths of the YPAR process, we remain concerned that the epistemological foundation of this approach to power remains rooted within an assumption of agential voluntarism that does not reflect the complex realities of social structures and the embeddedness of agents within them. In other words, these efforts to theorise power within YPAR focus on a relatively short-term conscientisation process that assumes power relations can become transparent, clearly articulated and overcome by the individuals involved. In doing so, they risk inadvertently replicating the spectre of the individualised, neoliberal subject capable of self-transformation through effort (Kennelly, 2018). As noted in wider forms of participatory research with children, a robust articulation of the circulations of power at the level of the embodied and pre-conscious, which are difficult to discern without the appropriate conceptual tools, tends to be lacking (Kiili et al., 2023).

To address this theoretical gap, Bourdieu’s socio-cultural theoretical approach – with a particular focus on his core concepts of *reflexivity*, *field*, *habitus* and *capital* – has been proposed as a means of revealing power within participatory research relationships that needs further exploration in practice (Kiili et al., 2023). We engage with this proposition by operationalising Bourdieu and Wacquant’s (1992, p. 229, emphasis theirs) ‘invitation’ to a deeply reflexive sociology, one in which ‘[t]he first and most pressing scientific priority . . . [is] to take as one’s object the social work of construction of the pre-constructed object’. Our ‘pre-constructed object’ is our own practice of YPAR, but the themes and concerns we discuss are also those of sociology more broadly, including the structural context of both the fieldwork site and academia (Roberts & Sanders, 2005); the uses of reflexivity in sociological research (Pink, 2001); and the role of care in thinking and knowing (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012).

There are obvious tensions in bringing aspects of Bourdieu’s theoretical corpus to bear on PAR and YPAR. Possibly the most evident is the notion of *action for social change*. This lies at the very core of participatory research practices, with explicit and sometimes righteous statements made about the importance of moving ‘beyond the ivory tower’ to ensure that participatory research practice leads to real world change through collaboration with others. Bourdieu, on the other hand, is noted for his focus on stasis rather than change, the reproduction of dominant patterns of inequality in the distributions of capitals

through unconscious behaviours and attitudes as well as competitive strategies for personal gain. Rather than evidence of a mis-fit, we suggest that Bourdieu's pragmatic insights are useful because they reveal how social inequality becomes so deeply sedimented that even well-intentioned, community-engaged PAR projects may not lead to significant social change. We also suggest it may provide a bridge into linking individual stories with 'larger social and historical forces and the public questions that are raised in their social, economic and political organisation' (Back, 2007, p. 23), and may enable us to better engage our 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 1959/2000) to understand our own research practices.

Below we outline Bourdieu's insights about the specificity of the scholastic field, the role of habitus and capital in diverse fields, and the circulation of power. We then offer an approach to reflexive analysis of YPAR practices, drawn from our own experiences. Foundationally, this inserts a critical awareness of how to acknowledge and make visible the existence of diverse and often divergent fields with their accompanying habitus and capitals between academics, young people and community organisations; how to think through the effects these have on the YPAR process; and how to address potential outcomes in order to better resist the perpetuation of domination.

## Doing YPAR with Bourdieu: Negotiating complex fields of power

Having argued for the benefits of a Bourdieusian approach, we must first understand what reflexive sociology means, according to Bourdieu. To scrutinise the very structures of sociological thinking by which the researcher has come to see the social world, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) highlight the need to 'get beneath' our own habituated scholarly training to *see* what otherwise we cannot. Bourdieu (2000, p. 49) identifies 'three scholastic fallacies' which are at the core of the inability of scholars to perceive 'the effects of unconsciously universalizing the vision of the world associated with the scholastic condition'. One of these he calls 'scholastic epistemocentrism' – in other words, the centring of academic ways of knowing in such a way that the logic of practice of those with whom we collaborate (in the case of YPAR, typically young people and community organisations) is obscured. This is not unique to the scholarly field, although this arena receives a great deal of attention in Bourdieu's written work (Bourdieu, 1990a, 1996, 2000).

To collaboratively operationalise reflexivity, we found that it was useful to apply Bourdieu's concepts of *field*, *habitus* and *capitals* to pick apart our embedded practices, as part of moving towards 'fundamentally antinarcissistic' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 72) epistemic reflexivity within research communities. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 16) define these terms thus:

A field consists of a set of objective, historical relations between positions anchored in certain forms of power (or capital), while habitus consists of a set of historical relations 'deposited' within individual bodies in the form of mental and corporeal schemata of perception, appreciation and action.

They elaborate, 'to think in terms of field is to think relationally' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 96). In other words, fields are social spaces, identifiable only in relation to other fields, where one's intrinsic and easy knowledge of one field only becomes evident when one passes into a new field where the internal logic of practice seems strange. Those who feel at ease within a given field do so because of their *habitus*, or the pre-conscious dispositions and principles underlying the habits that shape an individual's responses to the social space they find themselves within. The edges of a field can be ascertained empirically through the felt experiences of those who inhabit it, where the field effects begin to disperse as one approaches its edges. A 'field' can be marked by physical boundaries (a locker room, for instance, with its own rules of engagement amongst young athletes) but it is essentially a felt space, created by the relationships and hierarchies within the social world. It can thus overlap with physical space but also exists beyond it. Which field is at play in a given moment can also shift and change depending on the agents entering and leaving. Despite the fluidity of fields, they are hierarchical spaces, and the tendency is for the dominant in any given field to be closest to the dominant in the broader social field: 'The dominant is the one that occupies a position in the structure such that the structure acts on its behalf' (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 195). In other words, the dynamics between agents within fields tend to reproduce domination.

Bourdieu describes *habitus* as most durably shaped by the families and circumstances to which individuals are born (Bourdieu, 2000). It may also, however, be reshaped and shifted through access to education, practice and experience outside of the field of birth (Bourdieu, 1990b). Such subsequent shifts in *habitus* will never completely displace the original *habitus*, which may re-emerge through embodied and emotional responses to specific circumstances and permits the individual a certain ability to transition between distinct fields, those of origin and those of later acquisition. A field may overlap with certain other fields requiring similar dispositions. Those whose *habitus* is attenuated to be at ease within the scholastic field will find it easier than others to take up, without internal contradiction, the logic of that field (Bourdieu, 2000).

As fields are hierarchical spaces, reflexivity requires an understanding of how different forms of embodied, objectified or institutionalised resources are mobilised to vie for status. Bourdieu describes the valued resources in any field as *capital* (Bourdieu, 1990b, 1998). Of the different types of capital Bourdieu elaborates in his work, the most common are cultural, social, economic and symbolic. Bourdieu identifies cultural capital as the form that is most frequent and desirable amongst scholars, who might experience relative lack in the other forms of capital but benefit disproportionately from the acquisition of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1990a). The forms of capital that are most valued within a given field 'vary according to the specific place and moment at hand' (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 32). In any field, agents 'struggle to maintain or improve their position, that is, to conserve or increase' the capital which is specific to any field (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 153).

These concepts underpin Bourdieu's notion of power, which is rooted in analysis of how qualities that are embodied within individuals are reproduced and reinforced through multi-scalar structural inequality, including access to institutional authority (*symbolic capital*), adherence to cultural normativities (*cultural capital*), and alignment between one's *habitus*, forms of *capital* and the norms of a *field* in a given moment. Bourdieu

suggests that institutional, cultural and social strategies are designed to keep power amongst the powerful, who are described in Bourdieu's later scholarship, as Wacquant (1993) points out, not as the ruling or dominant class but as dominant positions in the 'field of power'. He notes that Bourdieu defines a field of power as 'the system of positions occupied by the holders of the diverse forms of capital which circulate [. . .] in the relatively autonomous fields which make up an advanced society' (Wacquant, 1993, p. 20). Bourdieu made this shift in language in order to emphasise that the 'real object of analysis is not individuals, nor even classes of individuals, nor the institutions to which they belong, but the *space of positions* that may be characterized through their properties' (Wacquant, 1993, p. 21). In the process of epistemic reflexivity, the aim is therefore to understand and potentially transform the objectifying epistemic and social relationships between knower, known and knowledge (Maton, 2003).

### **Walking and talking towards collaborative reflexivity**

Our approach to reflexivity was an experiment in how to become collaborative co-researchers for one another, turning our research methods on ourselves. We had come together as three scholars who had no previous experience of conducting research together courtesy of a visiting researcher programme offered by the UK institution at which two of the authors worked. The objective of this programme is to generate collaborative research and writing opportunities between visiting and local academics. We already knew that our shared interests included YPAR, homelessness, citizenship and inequality. After three days of intensive meetings, visits to local research field sites, and long conversations over meals, we decided to go for a walk together. We have all used walking in our own research practice as a way of working alongside young people (Kennelly, 2017; Larkins, 2016; Roy, 2016; Roy et al., 2015). Our aim on the walk was specifically to bring to light potential collaborations, a task we had tried the previous day, without much success, in front of a white board. Walking has been adopted as a research method in areas including anthropology and ethnography (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008; Pink, 2008), cultural geography (Anderson, 2004) and qualitative social science (Hall, 2009), seen as an innovative and collaborative way to produce knowledge. Seale and O'Neill (2019) suggest that 'A focus on walking . . . raises awareness of the researcher as a moving, interacting, relational being, in and through space and place'. They further point out that these characteristics of the researcher are also characteristics of the social science knowledge base, which is also moving and moveable (Seale & O'Neill, 2019). These ideas modelled our intentions for the work we were doing together; walking also set up a side-by-side encounter, supporting companionable conversations that enhanced empathy and collaborative knowledge making (Roy, 2012).

Our walk did not follow a planned route; instead, we set off together along a canal path close to the university where we were working. For much of the time we walked side-by-side, but at moments when the path was narrower and boggy, we walked in line. As we walked, we passed a voice recorder between us, in order to capture and share the conversation and the ideas that were emerging. At one point we chanced upon a labyrinth adjacent to the canal and walked in a line behind one another, each taking turns to lead as we traced a route to the centre and back to the edge again. The act of walking allowed



us to take time with difficult feelings and ideas, permitting them to sit as we walked silently together, before picking the ideas up again (Roy, 2016). The chanced upon labyrinth also seemed to offer an unexpected metaphor for some of the complexities of YPAR practice that we were exploring together, which also involves negotiating intricate and complex structures and arrangements in the form of metaphorical tunnels, passageways, chambers and blind alleys.

After the walk, to discern examples from our own YPAR practices for which a Bourdieusian analysis might be most productive, we had the recording transcribed, which allowed us to review and contemplate the identified moments of ambivalence within our experiences of YPAR. We each then wrote vignettes for shared reflection and interpretation, expanding what had been recorded to enable deeper collaborative reflection. The ambivalent moments we isolated, in order to further investigate, seemed to us affective moments that signalled a rupture between our habituated forms of knowing and the realities faced during the process of YPAR. Bourdieu remarks:

We learn bodily. The social order inscribes itself in bodies through this permanent confrontation, which may be more or less dramatic but is always largely marked by affectivity and, more precisely, by affective transactions with the environment. (2000, p. 141)

We therefore relied on our embodied and emotional experiences within the participatory research field as moments of analytical interest, trusting our ‘feel for the game’ in conducting YPAR that has become in some ways pre-reflexive – it has been incorporated into our habitus. We argue that moments of rupture, discomfort and unease are fruitful for examining ‘the transformation of habitus [which] lies in the gap, experienced as a positive or negative surprise, between expectations and experience’ (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 149).

With 60+ years of research experience between us (Kennelly: 19; Larkins: 26; and Roy: 24), we offered up our moments of vulnerability in the interest of furthering critical dialogue about the process, products and outcomes of participatory collaborations. We exchanged and discussed the vignettes we had authored via email and video meetings. Empathising, exclaiming and reflecting on similarities and differences in our experiences, exploring how we had each responded in difficult moments, we then brought Bourdieu’s concepts to bear on our own and each other’s vignettes to analyse the qualities of field, habitus and capital that served to concentrate power in dominant positions, and the glimmers of potential for change. To protect the anonymity of the young people we worked with, and to allow freedom in our reporting, some of the demographic details in vignettes are obscured. Over time, and through several versions of this article, we built a relationship of trust and, using ‘active and methodical listening’ (Sweetman, 2009, p. 497), we uncovered a shared reflexive habitus through which we were each able to explore moments in our own practice of which we were simultaneously ‘unaware’ but also knew ‘better than anyone’ (p. 497). We are thus linking our individual stories and experiences to wider social, political, structural and historical questions, both within YPAR and in sociology more broadly. Below we outline three moments of rupture and use the Bourdieusian concepts of field, habitus and capital to outline what, from this collaborative process, can be learned and used to inform action.



## Scholastic epistemocentrism and field effects

The third author's (Ali) vignette begins with the following question posed by a young man in the early stages of developing a participatory research project:

*How the fuck could something like this be useful to someone like me?*

The young man who asked this question was part of a small group who had been involved for a number of years with an agency that works with young men who have experienced homelessness, to offer opportunities to be involved in artistic projects and practical support for challenges faced in their day-to-day lives. The YPAR project offered at the time was a collaboration between the agency, Ali and two colleagues (with arts and academic backgrounds). The research began when Ali and one colleague attended a residential at an outdoor centre with staff, volunteers and young men from the organisation. Prior to this, Ali and his colleague had discussed with the project staff how they might introduce some ideas into activities and discussions in ways that might spark the young men's interest. Their early attempts to do so with the young men had resulted in the above question, which Ali felt was delivered in a deliberately provocative manner:

In the moment, I understood it to mean, 'is this project essentially **about us**, but **for you**?' It generated a moment of real discomfort for my colleague and I because neither of us knew the young men especially well at this point, but we also saw it as a fair question, because it named a classic tension in YPAR about who ultimately benefits from the work.

An element of the operational logic of practice in the academic field is that generating dialogue to produce knowledge is of value in and of itself. The young man's question demonstrated that he understood the operation of this logic – internal to academia – and that he wished to challenge it, to see whether Ali and colleague were prepared to acknowledge their own social embeddedness (as white, middle-class academics), and to move beyond their comfort zones and engage in 'uncomfortable conversations' (Gökarıksel & Smith, 2017, p. 640). The difficult question registered some of the distinct fields and capitals that were at play, which involved employed, housed and well-paid academics working together with unemployed, unhoused young men, who had to ensure the means of their own survival day-to-day. It was clear that we were occupying different social positions in fields that were overlapping in that moment.

Bourdieu notes that the 'things to be done' can look completely different depending on which field an agent is acting within and habituated to (2000, p. 151). Using Bourdieu's work, we can appreciate how the young man's question sought to test the participatory principles of the project, to name the experience of habitual domination and to question the logic of what was to be done. Ali recognised it as a way of questioning the sort of space that might be opened up in the project, of testing how the researchers would deal with their own discomfort, and of scrutinising whether the project might create a social space which allowed the young men's capital to be acknowledged and transformed into other forms of capital which might benefit them. In the moment, Ali, who worked for many years as a youth and community worker, was able to respond to this provocation

by asking the question back to the young men, to see if they might choose to identify something they would find useful that the project group could do together:

One of the young men mentioned a visual art project they had recently completed on the subject of ‘survival’, they all became quite animated by recollections about it, and through talking about that project, together we came up with the idea of creating a ‘Survival Guide’ to the city. What was interesting about this idea, was how it unearthed a new motive around the work. The men became especially interested by the idea that their knowledge and experience might become useful to other young men in the future.

The original question posed by the young man deliberately addressed the idea of personal use-value, but the actual motive which ultimately sustained the young men’s interest in the project was more selfless and knowledge-based, rooted in the idea that their collective experience and survival strategies might be of value to other young people in the future. Here the young men seemed rooted in the *habitus* of a field that might encompass the forms of social relations activated within community work and imagined within public sociology. The project was also able to establish a space in which having difficult conversations could become part of the work and in which the academics could be seen sitting with their own discomfort (Ishkanian & Saavedra, 2019). However, Ali’s registered ambivalence about this question also relates to the fact that this objective – of creating a survival guide – was only partially realised within this project, although it was realised more fully within a subsequent one (Roy et al., 2020).

Our collaborative reflexive Bourdieusian approach enabled Ali to begin to realise that the ambivalence was related to a persistent anxiety and fear that the work might ultimately have proved the young man’s question right. This is because, although the project successfully opened out collaborative spaces (which included guided walking tours by some of the young men) in which people worked together on issues around homelessness, recognising the knowledge of homeless young people and generating new stories that challenged existing narratives, in the end it did little to alter the situations of those involved. Also, the fact that the objective to realise a survival guide was achieved more fully in a subsequent project proved to be double edged, because several of the young men who took part in the project in 2014 also took part in this other project over three years later. This in itself emphasises how structural factors had continued to inhibit the lives of these young men (Roy, 2016). Hence we believe this vignette ultimately demonstrates that PAR is neither immune to reconstituting inequality, nor does it inevitably result in empowerment and justice (Roy et al., 2020).

## **The space of positions in the field of power**

The second author’s (Cath) vignette opens with her dilemma regarding a video-recorded reference to police officers as ‘pigs’, and her ongoing discomfort about this moment in her practice. A group of precariously housed youth had chosen to create a video learning resource as a guide to doing YPAR projects, to inspire other youth and community partners. A young person spoke to camera and started reflecting on a previous YPAR project which had helped achieve improved relations with local police:

The pigs. . . Shouldn't say that, but they are pigs. That's just what we call them. We had a meeting with a [police] community safety officer, and it's better now. Not that they do much to help. But they [the police] are not on us so much.

Cath's ambivalence in this moment stems from a deep appreciation for the histories of direct harassment from the police of this young person, and of their group's conflicted relationships with policing. Despite this young person reporting improvements in relations with the police, the word 'pigs' remained a core part of the young people's vocabulary and reflected the group's intersecting experiences of racist, classist and homophobic policing. But Cath had experience of young people's published words being taken out of context. She concludes her vignette with some reflection on discussing these issues with the young person:

Once they have finished speaking, I discuss editing with them. I name immediately the tension of the word pig. They want to keep it. I say I may need to edit it out. They say they understand this, but they think I'm being over-sensitive. I talk of my responsibility to represent them and their community in a positive light and not publish anything which may be used against them. I discuss the dilemma with a colleague. . . I edit it out.

In previous YPAR, Cath had supported a different group of young people to conduct research in which they had retained the word 'pig' to describe the police in a widely circulated publication. As a consequence, some gatekeepers had refused to allow other young people to engage with the project. In an earlier video from a different project, language had also been perceived as inflammatory, consequently disrupting young people's access to their community services. In the moment described in the vignette, Cath felt she *knew*, at the level of the preconscious acquired through enculturation into the field of childhood and youth services, that leaving in the word 'pigs' would mean some school and community partners would refuse to facilitate children's access to this YPAR learning resource. The vignette traces the way Cath tried to both validate the young people's experience of ongoing systemic prejudice, by discussing the structural classism, racism and homophobia they experienced, and to use the feel she has for the civil society field to ensure the video would be accepted and viewed by the intended audience (other children and young people wanting to take part in YPAR and their potential school and community partners).

The affordances of video here, as Sweetman (2009, referencing Dant, 2004) describes in another research setting, is that it enabled Cath to view and review, with the young person, alone, and with a colleague, the few seconds where the thorny question of editing was acutely laid bare. This enabled her to 'transform the "taken-for-granted" into a reflexive, self-critical practice' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 114). In this instance, there were multiple conflicting taken-for-granted positions. As a queer, white, middle-class adult researcher conducting participatory research with youth in the scholastic and civil society fields, she was conscious of the inherent inequalities of social positions that arise from how her symbolic and cultural capital as a university professor is valued far above that of working-class, racialised and precariously housed young people. As a participatory researcher, her reflex was to honour the integrity of what was presented. As a childhood studies researcher,

accessing research collaborators through child welfare and youth services, she also experienced a reflex of protectionism which is the habitus of that field – to protect the group and the project from criticism. Ultimately, despite the expectations Cath had of herself – to put the research resources at her disposal into the hands of the young people she was working with – she mobilised her advantaged relationship to the capitals circulating in the scholastic field to enact the decision to edit out the word ‘pigs’.

Through the walking discussion with Jackie and Ali, and later writing the vignette on a plane flying home from a conference, Cath was able to attend to what had been learned bodily, and to understand this vignette’s moment not only as the multiple collisions of institutional, interpersonal and symbolic power and competing habitus, but also as ‘a long story of relationships that tells you about my life’ (Cath’s vignette). As already noted, walking provides liminal space in which the hard-to-name can surface. By clearly voicing the competing reflexes, and being willing to lay bare to colleagues the personal and professional histories of young people’s and her own personal exposure to risk and harm (which is not described in detail here), Cath acknowledged a deep seated fear that putting things into words can be dangerous, a disposition inherited from childhood and reinforced by certain moments of professional experience. In the story recounted in the vignette, she had prioritised protecting herself (as well as the young people) without a fully conscious appreciation of this and how, with the young people, she could have more clearly explored the power relationships at play.

A deeper conceptualisation of power, such as that offered by Bourdieu’s work, operationalised in our case through a mutual, collaborative and relational process of sharing, reflection and feedback, may enable academics to attune to some of our limiting reflexes and enhance our ability to support young people’s activism for social change. Cath now consciously allows herself more space and time to sit with the emotional challenges of a clash between the habitus of overlapping fields, histories and social positions of both herself and the young people she works with; she now articulates this more fully in conversations with young people. Whilst the messiness of competing power dynamics and priorities remain, and differences related to, for example, class, race, gender, age cannot readily be reconciled, in subsequent research young people have been able to direct the Cath’s actions, making uncensored decisions about language use in their research products and directing her on how to use her privileged position to assert and defend their words.

## **Distributions of capital through differing fields**

The complex quagmire of perspectives, needs, dispositions and priorities in YPAR is perhaps even more marked when working across extreme class differences, such as the work all three authors do with marginalised, impoverished, homeless and precariously housed young people. As participatory research will often involve contact across many years, and in contexts not limited to interviews or focus groups, relationships have the opportunity to strengthen, deepen and become friendships (Ishkanian & Saavedra, 2019) – or to clash and dissolve, with the potential for misunderstanding and hurt feelings on all sides.

The first author's (Jackie) vignette begins by describing three years of collaboration between herself and a group of homeless and formerly homeless young people, which included employing some of them as peer researchers on a community-based project, engaging many of them as an advisory group on a second project, and then working together on a third, larger-scale research project. She highlights the strong sense of camaraderie, care and connection that emerged between many of the young people and herself over the first few years of this work. However, this connection was not without its challenges. As Jackie notes:

One dynamic that played out as we came to know one another better was the glaring difference in our economic status. This is one I navigate with a great deal of discomfort, as I come from a history of poverty and have my own experience of what it feels like to be poor and to encounter those with more wealth. I was always aware that my circumstances would likely seem absurdly luxurious to [peer researchers].

Jackie's deepening relationships with team members was marked by distinctions shaped by access to cultural and material capital, shifting class habitus, and their specific positions in different but overlapping fields. Jackie's discomfort with being identified as 'rich' comes from a working-class habitus that has shifted substantially over the course of her education, involving the accumulation of economic, symbolic and cultural capital. It is this same original habitus that has strengthened her capacity to work with impoverished young people, recognising in them glimpses of her own experiences as a youth and what she witnessed amongst friends and neighbours in poor and working-class neighbourhoods where she grew up.

Her vignette continues by describing how Jackie sought to use her acquired cultural, social and economic capital to support youth team members. This included mentoring team members into higher education opportunities, writing reference letters, revising resumes, connecting them to housing options, or sharing employment opportunities. As their relationships deepened, some team members would divulge more intimate and vulnerable details to her, including gender-based violence and experiences with discrimination. Jackie describes her response to some of these disclosures as to feel:

. . . helpless, enraged (on their behalf), and [to] try to figure out resources I could recommend to them, which may or may not have been helpful to them but appeased my sense of helplessness and fury at the injustices they faced.

Jackie attempts to draw on her different forms of capital as former youth worker, current university professor and community advocate to find resources, opportunities and support, but often with limited success. This is in part due to the utter lack of adequate supports for youth in Canada – a large reason for the ballooning crisis of youth homelessness in the first place – but is also due to differing habitus, whereby the steps that seem logical and feasible to Jackie may seem neither logical nor feasible to the youth with whom she is working. Although Jackie's own childhood experience arguably creates some overlapping habitus with members of the youth team, she has never been homeless. The 'common sense' of team members in terms of how to respond to issues such as domestic violence, complex trauma, recurrent substance use issues, and current struggles for housing are not shared by her.

Working with young people through longer term YPAR processes, which for Jackie and Cath involve collaborations that have spanned up to eight years, can often entail shifting positions in relation to capitals in the overlapping fields we inhabit. Bourdieu helps us understand that the unequal distribution of powers, derived from accruing different forms of capital in a hierarchical social order, means that ‘the economic and social world presents itself not as a universe of possibles equally accessible to every possible subject . . . but rather as a signposted universe, full of injunctions and prohibitions, signs of appropriation and exclusion, obligatory routes or impassable barriers, and, in a word, profoundly differentiated’ (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 225). The ‘profoundly differentiated’ economic and social worlds of Jackie and young people who have experienced homelessness enabled opportunities – Jackie could use her access to cultural, social and economic capital to offer resources – while simultaneously bringing into view the clear boundaries between them which sometimes generated painful conflicts. For example, a graduate RA ended up frustrated and left the project, feeling that insufficient financial support for youth team members had been included in the grant budget. Having themselves experienced homelessness, it seemed to them that the youth ought to be receiving more and better support for their participation in the project. From the scholastic field in which Jackie is now enmeshed, she recognised that granting agencies are not always willing to provide such funds for youth team members, and that proper financial documentation is required by the university. She needed to navigate responding to the needs of the youth team, meeting her reporting requirements, and fulfilling her obligations to the granting body. The conflict was upsetting for everyone involved. Jackie made choices to retain an (acquired) social position as respectable university professor, and the capital and networks which enable provision of some support to homeless youth (individually and collectively). These choices were understandably not always intelligible to graduate RAs or members of the youth team whose habitus were shaped by a field socially located quite far from that of academia.

Whilst acknowledging how her shifting social position brought into view the clear boundaries which sometimes generated situations that Jackie found hurtful and impossible to resolve, engaging in our collaborative process of walking, talking, drafting and discussing vignettes provided opportunities to transform this discomfort into stronger tools for healthy boundary maintenance, clearer communication and more effective youth-engaged projects. This has involved some honest reflections about what she can and cannot offer young people in terms of supports and opportunities, and a better ability to relay these limits and possibilities more openly to herself and the youth with whom she continues to work. It has enabled her to co-create clarity about the logic of practice of the overlapping fields in which she is collaborating with youth, and to explore new ways of redistributing capital, which over a longer term may lead to the transformation she and the collaborating youth are seeking.

## Conclusions

Bourdieu’s sociological theory is better known for generating explanations as to why social worlds endure and inequality is reproduced, rather than for offering insights into how social change might occur in practice. Nonetheless, the goal of his scholarship has



always been to provide the basis for understanding the sedimentation of inequality *in order to* change it, and he exhorts other scholars to take on the same ends:

For reasons no doubt relating to my own person and to the state of the world, I have come to believe that those who have the good fortune to be able to devote their lives to the study of the social world cannot stand aside, neutral and indifferent, from the struggles in which the future of that world is at stake. (Bourdieu, 2003, p. 11)

As scholars similarly committed to social change, we see YPAR and other forms of critical and participatory sociology as holding promise towards achieving such ends, albeit slowly, with multiple stops and starts, and with appropriate humility in the face of the numerous structural and practical barriers to meeting such lofty goals. Fundamentally, we argue, this is dependent on academic researchers' capacity to unpick the impact of preconscious dispositions and concentrations of capital, and to reflexively explore the circulation of power in the overlapping and distinct fields they inhabit with research collaborators and participants. As we have sought to demonstrate in this article, a Bourdieusian approach to analysing power dynamics within YPAR offers new resources to the field that can move beyond a simple binary of 'powerful' vs 'marginalised' and can also avoid voluntarist assumptions when addressing power differentials. It does so by recentring the pre-conscious and dispositional aspects of relational interactions (i.e. *habitus*), alongside the analytical tools of (cultural, social, etc.) 'capital' and 'field'.

Like any form of social research, participatory research involves interactions – and sometimes collisions – between diverse fields, positions and the respective forms of capital and *habitus* associated with each. Perhaps unique to PAR and YPAR is the degree to which these distinct and sometimes conflicting fields – and more specifically the actors within them – must find modes and means by which to build relationships and collaborations, sometimes over an extended period of time. Through mutual analyses of our three vignettes, we argue that YPAR – as one form of sociological enquiry – must start from attempts to understand the varied fields into which we are bringing our scholastic game, before and throughout our engagement with participants. In working alongside youth or community researchers in PAR, we must be brave enough to name and honestly explore the personal and professional positions of ourselves and collaborators in competing fields of power, laying bare the constraints we encounter and the limitations to what we can offer. This involves more than simply stating that academics have privilege that research participants do not. Instead, it requires a fundamental theoretical reorientation that enables us to identify and name how power circulates unevenly and through which social positions, why it does so, and what we might do about it. As Wood (2014, p. 743) argues, this requires attention to the practical contexts and limiting conditions of knowledge production. To be capable of working with these limits ourselves, we must reflect on the extent to which we are willing to – and able to – step outside of the boundaries of the scholastic field, and perhaps embrace or reject our own personal histories, in order to pursue more radical ends.

Ishkanian and Saavedra (2019, p. 990) identify some important steps that might be taken to operationalise the process of co-constructing knowledge in PAR, by taking into account our intersecting positions and by 'acknowledging our positionalities' (in their



case as academics and activists), ‘our differences’ (for example, in age and professional status), ‘and the inherent power dynamics in any research endeavour’. Our suggestion is to take this a step further: to trace the roots of our habitus and any uncomfortable shifts in this and to lay bare surprising truths of ourselves (Sweetman, 2009), YPAR researchers may benefit from combining walking methods, reflective vignettes and ongoing collaborative conversations with academic peers. This is not to negate the importance of co-reflection with other project participants such as youth co-researchers and community organisations. Ishkanian and Saavedra (2019, drawing on Collins, 1990) suggest that dialogue within PAR is critical, and we too found the benefits of this, but also the barriers to it. There are some insights which we have gained through this dialogue with each other, which were not named by or with PAR co-researchers in the original projects. We believe this has enabled us to more honestly acknowledge our intersecting positionalities and to bring our braver selves into future sociological enquiry. Thus our second aim in the article is to urge other researchers, particularly those engaged in YPAR or PAR, to consider walking and talking methods, combined with collaborative writing, with like-minded colleagues in order to unpick some of the more challenging and/or ambivalent moments in their own research practice.

Thinking closely and critically (reflexively) can dissolve the stickiness of common-sense beliefs and practices that reproduce inequality (Wacquant, 2004). We believe that turning theories as well as methods on ourselves plays an important role here. Bourdieu’s sociological toolkit offers a pathway to collective epistemic reflexivity. We offer the insight that walking conversations, vignettes and ongoing exchanges with colleagues in a relationship of trust can provide the means for deeper reflexive processes to unfold. Analysing moments of embodied ambivalence within our own research practices has helped us understand how conditions within our lives (including class, geography, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, training, communication style, etc.), mental processes (both conscious and unconscious), and the structural and systemic constraints of particular projects, have all influenced the process within them as well as the outcomes and effects. Working with academic peers allowed exposure but also, from a shared feel for the scholastic game and YPAR, to understand each other’s interpretations, and projections, about this material and the affective components of the research relationships. This has been difficult, sometimes upsetting, but ultimately valuable in recognising how the social embeddedness of our own experiences has framed and co-produced our research interactions (Bourdieu, 1977) and how we might take some steps towards a shared reflexive habitus within a research collaboration. It may be a valuable approach for other Bourdieusian sociologists who seek to develop a group capacity towards epistemic reflexivity.

In our efforts at reflexive sociology, we hope to also offer a deepening engagement with the practice of YPAR in a manner that generates greater caution about political claims of youth empowerment, social change and personal growth that are common accompaniments to contemporary accounts of participatory research with youth. In its place, we offer an approach to YPAR that maintains the focus on young people as capable of significant insights into their own social worlds and the sources of inequality that hinder them, and of being able to work towards shifting such inequalities – with the support of adults who are able to redistribute some of the forms of capital that enable such positive change – while not denying our ongoing enmeshment in hierarchical structures

that shape our social engagements, even in participatory research. By offering methodologies for more fully articulating the barriers to change within our own practice, we seek to enable future YPAR that is more finely attuned to the gaps between expectations and experience in which transformation of habitus may be possible. We also seek to lay bare the extended timescales, and long-term engagements, which may be necessary to enable co-reflection with academic peers and with YPAR collaborators, so that our actions towards social change can be more astutely directed.

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