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Susan O'Shaughnessy  
*Dublin Institute of Technology*

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## **A methodological story, or how I planned to create a (metaphorical) chest of drawers and ended up with a bedside table**

**Susan O'Shaughnessy**

Email: [susan.oshaghnessy@dit.ie](mailto:susan.oshaghnessy@dit.ie)

### **Abstract**

*This paper sets out the story of a research project that culminated in a thesis submitted to the University of Sheffield for the award of Doctor of Education (EdD). Its purpose is to examine the process of research over the almost three year period of the project and explore the methodological challenges that were confronted and that shaped the project as it evolved. It discusses how the choice of a theoretical framework using several of Bourdieu's key concepts affected the research and the methodology that was used and examines the reflexivity that is required to counteract the negative aspects of insider research in a higher education institution. The use of life history interviews and case studies is also explored.*

### **Introduction**

My position as a lecturer in German came about at a time when German had been introduced onto almost all engineering programmes in my college to meet the demand of students who often went abroad during their summer holidays to earn money for their studies and to gain practical experience linked to their discipline. In this era before the Celtic tiger, many engineering graduates also were expected to emigrate to find work. Little over a decade later, however, German was suddenly removed from engineering programmes, leaving me without students or a timetable and with a sense of insecurity about my future career and professional identity. As a permanent member of staff with the support of the teachers' union (TUI), I did not need to fear unemployment, unlike my part-time colleagues who were let go once there were no German teaching hours available, but I did need to find an occupation and a way of contributing within the institution that continued to employ me.

Similar challenges were faced by colleagues in many higher education institutions in Ireland, especially in the institute of technology (IoT) sector where languages were rarely seen as a stand-alone discipline. German could be removed readily from programmes across the sector once student demand fell below what was considered a viable level and, while part-time teachers were easily dispensed with, permanent staff were put in the same position as me and forced to reinvent themselves professionally if they were to find a role within their institutions. I became curious to find out how colleagues were coping with these changes and how their professional identities were being reshaped under the pressures they and their discipline were undergoing. The EdD programme of the University of Sheffield was the

catalyst to allow me to research and analyse the process of change to my own and my colleagues' professional identities over the ensuing period. This paper sets out the epistemological and methodological standpoint that informed the data collection and analysis of this research project. In other words, it traces the reasons why I chose to gather certain types of data, how I went about collecting and analysing them and how, like, perhaps, what might happen when constructing a piece of furniture, the shape of the project continued to shift as I met obstacles or encountered new ideas along the way. This is the methodological story of my thesis (O'Shaughnessy 2010).

### **How my research questions shaped my theoretical approach**

The research questions I started out with were informed from the outset by the background and events described above, which unfolded over the years from 2001 onwards. My first question was to assess what had been the scale of change for German language lecturers in selected Irish higher education institutions over the last decade. This type of question presupposes a desire to quantify the problem, to discover its extent and its boundaries and it was indeed an objective of my study to gain an understanding of the size of the problem, the number of people involved and the extent of change they had been required to contend with. I chose to use Bourdieu's concept of field, defined as 'structured spaces of positions (or posts) whose properties depend on their positions within these spaces and which can be analysed independently of the characteristics of their occupants (which are partly levels of power and influence at work upon the professional lives of German determined by them)' (Bourdieu 1993, p. 72) as a method of delineating the various lecturers within their department or school, their institution, the higher education sector to which it belongs, as well as the national and international policy fields within which all these sub-fields operate.

However, my interest was not solely in the structures that had affected the changes made by lecturers. I was also interested in their individual choices and how they as agents had shaped their professional lives since the demand for their subject had collapsed. My second research question was to address how individual academics in Irish institutions were coping with changes to their professional identities. On a conceptual level this focus on individual experiences and trajectories brought Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital into the framework and allowed the project to examine the influence of these concepts on individual professional identities in flux. In my understanding of these concepts, 'habitus' is a durable set of dispositions acquired during a person's life experiences and applied in situations in a

way that reduces all the possible choices and reactions of an individual or group to a limited set of actions and behaviours (see Bourdieu 1990), while 'capital' in various forms (such as economic, social or cultural capital) is what motivates agents to try to gain dominance of a field, legitimate their own control of it and gain the profits (further capital) that the field generates (Bourdieu 1984, 1988). The main data gathering mechanism to answer this question was qualitative, the conducting of unstructured and semi-structured interviews (Fontana and Frey 2005), most of them with German lecturers affected by change over recent years but others with informants who had had an institutional role to play during the period of change and since then and who were able to provide some of the background information surrounding this period of individual and structural upheaval.

A key objective that developed with ever greater intensity throughout the life of the project was a desire to demonstrate the usefulness of Bourdieu's 'socio-analytical toolkit' (Zipin and Brennan 2004) of concepts as a thorough methodological approach to data collection and analysis. Unlike Nash (1999) and Reay (2004) who discuss the use of habitus as a methodology, I wanted to use a range of Bourdieu's concepts from habitus, capital and field to reflexivity not only inform a theoretical understanding of the object of study but also to shape the progress and the process of the project itself.

### **Reflexivity and the issue of insider research**

Reflexivity, both in general terms and as understood by Bourdieu, was essential as a tool to help me explain my position and my consciousness of being an insider researcher. From the epistemological standpoint of the qualitative researcher, the validity and the valuable insights that can be gained from insider research (Sikes and Potts 2008) do not need to be argued – given that 'there is really no such thing as pure objective observation of much human behaviour in real work situations' (Smyth and Holian 2008, p. 37); that 'all observation is theory laden and dependent on past experience of the observer' (ibid) and that this holds true for the participant who is as much interviewing as observing her colleagues. In undertaking insider research, as a person who not only was employed in one of the institutions explored in this study but had also personally experienced the changes I describe, I had the not inconsiderable example of Bourdieu before me, whose *Homo Academicus* (1988) examined the phenomenon of change within the French higher education system of the 1960s and 1970s – albeit with many more participants, at much greater length and over a longer time span than my project could offer.

It is essential to remain aware of the positive and negative aspects of insider research, in order to counteract the negative aspects as much as possible while taking advantage of the positive aspects for the benefit of the project. Some of the positive attributes of insider research are that it brings a pre-understanding of the issues involved (Smyth and Holian 2008) and it can allow greater access to information and to respondents who may be more open to a colleague than they would be to an outside researcher (Potts 2008). Negatives include: issues related to anonymity, ethical matters and credibility (Smyth and Holian 2008), validity, power differentials between interviewer and respondents (Sikes and Potts 2008), the possibility of self-censorship by the researcher because of an oversensitivity towards the effects of the research (Potts 2008) and the risks and tensions involved in continuing to work within the same environment after the research is completed and made public.

One of the most effective ways of guarding against the negative aspects of doing insider research is by maintaining a high level of reflexivity as this enhances ‘the credibility of findings by taking into account the researcher’s values, beliefs, knowledge and biases’ (Al x and Hammerstr m 2008, p. 170). If that is what reflexivity *does*, what *is* it exactly? As Tripp (1998) explains it, reflexivity has several meanings, one of which encapsulates the idea of reflecting, as in a mirror, but also in the sense of reflection as thinking back over things. This type of ‘memory work’ takes the form of life history narratives when employed in research. It is seen as constituting identity (Tierney 2000) while, it is argued, the ‘political nature and potential of memory’ (Sikes and Goodson 2003, p. 48) sets it up in opposition to history which is ‘perpetually suspicious of memory and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it’ (Nora 1989, quoted in Sikes and Goodson 2003, p. 49). This understanding of reflexivity allows for the expression of forms of truth and experience that are not normally in the public sphere. The researcher, therefore, can give a voice to those memories and reflections that are so often lost and forgotten, as well as to the people who have and share them.

D’Cruz et al (2007) identify at least three alternative meanings for the term ‘reflexivity’ ranging from the application of (1) a ‘skill to process information and enhance decision making’ (p. 77) to (2) a critical awareness of the self and of knowledge as a social construction (p. 85) to (3) a still more heightened awareness of ‘the influences on knowledge creation, from the interplay between cognition and emotion and the connections between structural power and interpersonal relationships’ (p. 82). While I kept all these meanings in mind throughout my research project it was particularly those meanings 2 and 3 above that

affected how I approached the analysis of the data collected and how I attempted to record the process of analysis itself. My stance could therefore be summarized as

an attempt to identify, do something about, and acknowledge the limitations of the research: its location, its subjects, its process, its theoretical context, its data, its analysis, and how accounts recognize that the construction of knowledge takes place in the world and not apart from it (Smyth and Shacklock 1998, p. 7).

Bourdieu espoused the concept of 'reflexive sociology' in order to avoid the bias of the sociologist or intellectual who objectivises the object of study but omits to objectify his own role and position within the field of which he is also a part. Reflexive sociology allowed him to 'continually [turn] the instruments of his science upon himself' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 36) and avoided the danger of confusing the reflexivity which derives from psychoanalysis with that related to socioanalysis; to Bourdieu the more popular 'psychoanalytic reflexivity' derived from a desire to individualise experience and provide therapy while 'sociological reflexivity ... makes us discover things that are *generic*, things that are shared, banal, commonplace' (ibid, p. 72, italics in original).

It was these ordinary social experiences that I was intent on examining in my research. I was anxious to avoid engaging in personal therapy, to indulge in an autobiographical account of the events I described or project my own experiences onto the accounts of my respondents. Nonetheless, there was a therapeutic value in telling the story and attempting to make sense of past events, both for myself and as expressed to me by several of my interviewees (Merrill and West 2009), while remaining conscious that it was the social and structural background to personal choices that gave an additional layer of objective meaning to my research findings. However, I was also aware that Bourdieu was not averse to an autobiographical standpoint which increasingly appeared in his work as he got older. This perspective is explored in the next section.

### **Auto/biography and the life history approach as data**

Over the course of my study I came reluctantly to the realisation that a research project into my professional colleagues would not make sense without including an account of my own professional trajectory and the changes I had undergone in my career as a lecturer in German. My reluctance stemmed from a number of sources. In researching a paper exploring the usefulness of life history as a methodological approach (O'Shaughnessy 2007), I was struck by the openness of some educational sociologists (Carr 1995, Roberts 1998, Sikes and Goodson 2003) who were prepared to bring their own life histories into their work, almost as

a way of apologising for their intrusion into the life histories of the subjects of their research. At first I was enchanted by their stories and pleased to see that there could be a link between the literature and humanities subjects of my own academic past and the discipline of sociology that I was now about to enter. However, as I looked in greater detail at their accounts of how they had grown up to be academics far removed from the social trajectory that was expected of them within their (generally working-class) family circles, I became frustrated by some of the writers' lack of critical analysis of the social structures that had surrounded their choices and allowed them to change their social class when others could not. It seemed to me that there was something missing from their stories, mediated as they must have been by many years' experience of writing as academics and memories filtered by their expertise in interviewing and producing qualitative research.

Another point was that these autobiographical accounts were written by people with a long track record in their discipline who, having spent years examining the lives of others, had earned the right to talk about themselves in the same way, if they wished. An intellectual autobiography is not unusual towards the end of a distinguished academic career, as the intellectual autobiographies of Ricoeur (Hahn 1995) and Gadamer (Hahn 1997) can attest. As a new researcher I did not feel I had earned the right to bring my own life history or intellectual trajectory into my first serious research project.

Then I read Bourdieu's posthumous *Sketch for a Self-Analysis* (2007), which he had written – perhaps tongue in cheek (Robbins 2007) – intending that 'this is not an autobiography' (Bourdieu 2007, p. x), and saw my own fears expressed from the very first lines. What Bourdieu set out to do in this work was to 'try to gather together and present some elements for a self-socioanalysis' (p. 1) while conscious of his 'apprehensions, which go beyond the habitual fear of being misunderstood' (ibid). What the book shows clearly is how issues that affected his formative years – his peasant background in Béarn, his boarding school experiences and later academic formation in elite institutions in Paris and his time in Algeria during the war of independence – went on to form the basis of some of Bourdieu's best known and most influential works (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, Bourdieu 1988, 1990, 1991, Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Aware of 'the scale of [his] path through social space and the incompatibility of the social worlds that it links without reconciling them' (Bourdieu 2007, p. 1) Bourdieu used the 'point of view of sociology' to explain and understand himself and his life choices as if they were 'any other object' (ibid).

Bourdieu was not always so confident in putting himself into the frame, as his account of the writing of an article in the mid-1970s based on his observations at a village dance in Béarn explains: 'at the time I felt compelled to "disappear". I contrived to use impersonal sentences so as never to write "I" (...)' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, pp. 162-3). In *Homo Academicus* (1988) too, he may have contrived to avoid using 'I' but he, very clearly, intended to include himself in his analysis of the French academic world, so that, as a reflexive sociologist, he could fix his gaze upon himself as 'one representative of a category' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 203) and thereby 'say aloud the truth of others by speaking about myself' (ibid).

It was this point which brought me to the realisation that my study of German language lecturers required my own sociological self-objectivation if it was to offer a thorough insight into the positions and dispositions of IoT colleagues. Having informed the participants of my project before they had agreed to take part that I would not delve into their personal lives during the interviews unless they were open to doing so themselves, I found that very few were. I had also asked my respondents to provide a curriculum vitae, while guaranteeing their anonymity, in order to provide some background information to their academic trajectories that might not surface during the interviews, but most did not do so. It began to seem impossible, therefore, to examine the workings of the individual habitus of my interviewees as 'a system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions...' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 18) if I did not have the opportunity to go back into their family history and their personal trajectories from before they had begun their academic careers. Turning my socioanalysis onto myself provided a solution that allowed me to go back to the formation of the habitus of at least one representative of the category of German language lecturer. It also helped me to position my professional experiences within the field of German language teaching and the specific institutional field where I had been employed for many years.

This realisation came towards the end of collecting my primary data, after I had conducted two rounds of interviews and gathered numerous institutional and policy documents. The interviews were the main data source and fell into three functional categories. The first category involved 19 German lecturers, either permanent staff who were still in employment or former part-timers who had moved on to other work and studies, from a number of higher education institutions. With this group, whom I referred to as 'respondents', I used a life



history interview approach in a semi-structured and open-ended format. A second group of five interviewees, defined as ‘informants’, were asked to provide information on the structural background to the changes that occurred in the professional lives of German lecturers in the institution which was to become the main focus of the project. Finally, having decided to concentrate mostly on this institution I returned to the respondents who continued to work there and re-interviewed nine of the ten lecturers from the first round (the tenth person being unavailable at the time). The second interview was targeted at eliciting responses relating to Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, capital, field and reflexivity and therefore took a more directed approach than the life history-style of the first interviews. I also emailed similar questions to the six interviewees from the other institutions and received thoughtful responses from all of them – in practice, these interviewees turned out to be as much informants about the institutions where they worked as they were respondents to questions about their career histories. The remaining interviewees from round one, the three former part-timers, were not contacted to provide further information on the basis that they were no longer in the institutional field that had ejected them several years earlier and that had triggered, but no longer directly affected, the changes that their professional identities had undergone.

A limited form of life history interviewing was therefore one of the main sources of information for my research. Before embarking on the interview process I wanted to be sure that I understood exactly what the term meant.

It is clear from the literature on life history research that, without the reflexivity discussed above and an awareness by the researcher that her autobiography shapes both the research itself and her response to the data that is uncovered (Scott 1998, Tierney 2000, Usher 2001), life history may amount to no more than storytelling (Goodson and Sikes 2001, Usher 2001). As Bourdieu points out (Bourdieu et al 1999), it is the interviewer who starts the game, sets out the rules and has the obligation to avoid ‘symbolic violence’ to the person whose story is being told. However, it must always be remembered that there are two people in any interview situation and that the biography of the interviewee also comes into play. He or she takes the opportunity to create a narrative account, sometimes about a subject that has not been given voice to before – and this can amount to a political act (Merrill and West 2009) which brings the present and the future into the recounting of past events. Life history is a narrative statement and a retrospective account (Tierney 2000) that imposes a chronology to the unfolding activities of a life while also creating boundaries around the happenings and

situations that form the focus of the research (Elliot 2005). In creating a narrative an individual gains a sense of herself as an 'intentional agent with continuity through time' (ibid, p. 126) and constitutes an identity in the act of constructing the narrative.

For Scott (1998) biographical narrative involves 'recursive dilemmas' (p. 32) because it bends back on itself – it is a 'text constituted in and through history' (p. 35) in which social actors shape public events through their own autobiography. This suggests that life history is not merely the recounting of memories but is mediated through the social structures that surround the events narrated and the agency of the participants on both sides of the interview table – the respondent and the researcher have a role in the construction of the narratives that eventually form the story of the research project itself. Bourdieu's interview methodology (Bourdieu et al 1999) supports this view by arguing that, for the researcher, 'understanding and explaining are one' (p. 613).

These, then, were some of the epistemological issues that affected my choice of methodology during the course of my research. I now turn to the process I undertook to find answers to the two research questions I began with.

### **The story of the project: collecting the data**

Unlike Bourdieu, who came to regret his failure to keep a diary during his research into French higher education (Bourdieu 1988), I was fortunate to have been encouraged to keep a research journal from the earliest stages of the EdD programme. Once the thesis proposal was underway it became a space to plan out the work I needed to do and the interview schedules; to note my impressions and thoughts after interviews with respondents and meetings with my supervisor; to record new ideas and changes of direction as the research progressed and to motivate and ground myself at times when the research did not seem to be progressing at all. My research journal became the red thread that held the project together although, given the part-time nature of the research, there were often long gaps while I got on with other aspects of my professional life. At other times, such as when I was hurrying to complete an analysis of the first interviews of the participants I was planning to interview a second time and then conducting the second interviews within a short and busy time-frame, I later regretted that I did not find the opportunity to record my impressions of most of these second-round interviews and had to rely on hazy memory to remind me of the background details. While not as thorough as it might have been, the journal became a valuable document in providing internal validity (Elliott 2005) to the research process by triangulating the facts as they

occurred at the time, my analysis of the interviews themselves and my memories and impressions from the distance of more than a year later as I wrote up my thesis.

As a starting point to gaining an understanding of the issues that surround the concept of 'professional identity' I undertook a thematic review of the literature. The purpose of a literature review, according to Schostak (2002), is that it gives focus to the 'key foundational debates' (p. 27) that surround the central interests of the researcher. By reading deeply, but not too widely because otherwise there would be no limit, it becomes possible 'to find one's own questions, see how other writers have tried to answer these and then formulate one's own responses' (ibid). In my case, because I was not based near the University of Sheffield library and would have had difficulty in accessing books I might require, I concentrated mostly on journal articles. This had the advantage of allowing me to search through journal archives online as well as getting immediate access to the most recent writing on the subject. By setting up Zetoc alerts online I was instantly contacted by email as soon as specified sociology and education journals and articles containing certain key words were published. In this way I was kept abreast of newly published work and was able to incorporate new and interesting insights throughout the project.

I undertook a similar process with regard to working out my conceptual framework. Having decided during the thesis proposal stage that Bourdieu's concepts looked most appropriate to my research, in helping to provide answers to such questions as what identity is and how it changes under certain structural conditions, I proceeded to write a reflective essay on how Bourdieu could be used to frame the methodology of the project. Reading a number of key primary texts (Bourdieu 1984, 1988, 1990, 1993, 1999, Bourdieu et al 1999) and some secondary sources, including Swartz (1997) and Grenfell (2004, 2007), gave me a preliminary understanding of how Bourdieu's work could shape theory, methodology and research methods. By continuing to widen my reading of Bourdieu and some of the numerous writers who have discussed his work, particularly as it relates to education, educational institutions and organisational analysis, I kept up to date with journal articles on these subjects which informed my thinking throughout the planning and writing of the thesis.

The first step in beginning the next stage, the interview process, was to put my proposal through the ethical review procedure of the university. I drew up an information sheet for potential participants which described in straightforward terms the aims, objectives and methodology of my research and why they had been selected: because they were either

lecturers in German whose professional identities had been affected by change or were in management positions during the time this change took place. I assured the ethics review committee that the information given by participants would remain confidential and anonymous and would be safely stored in my office at home. However, on the advice of my supervisor, I alerted potential interviewees that I would be unable to give an absolute guarantee of anonymity because of the relatively small pool of German lecturers and higher education institutions in Ireland but would use pseudonyms for both themselves and the institution they worked at and try to ensure at all times that they could not be identified and would be fairly represented in the thesis.

Once the project was approved I went on to contact potential interviewees. Not expecting that everyone would want to take part I emailed twelve permanent lecturers at one IoT and received a positive response from eleven of them, although one individual subsequently withdrew on receipt of the participant information sheet. Later, at the first interview stage, two lecturers wanted further verbal assurances that their audio recordings would not be used in public – at that point I realised that the information sheet had not been clear enough in expressing my intention to use only transcripts of audio recording, not the voices themselves, in the event of presenting my research at conferences. I had decided initially that I would concentrate on two other IoTs and made contact with three lecturers in each institution. Unfortunately, at the first of these, one lecturer was not available on the day we had arranged to meet and then went on extended leave. At the second IoT one lecturer withdrew on receipt of the participant information sheet and another was not available on the day I came to interview him. The third lecturer was extremely helpful and gave me an overview of her institution as well as her own situation. At that point I decided to widen out my approach to get a more general sense of the issues at work across the IoT sector and therefore contacted two more German lecturers from two different IoTs. For contrast, and to give some insight into the issue of academic identity in the university sector (Henkel 2004, 2005, Harris 2005, Archer 2008, Clegg 2008, Kolsaker 2008), I also contacted a lecturer at a university where languages are more often applied to the needs of industry and technology, as in the IoT sector, than the traditional university view of languages as pertaining to literature and philosophy.

At the same time I also included a small number of managers from one IoT who had been involved in or aware of the decisions to remove German from several programmes across the institution, because it seemed likely that very little of that decision-making process would be

available in documented form. One of these informants suggested approaching a human resources (HR) manager to give a different perspective on how lecturers had changed their careers. When I interviewed this informant I discovered that he had not been employed at the institution at the time in question – nonetheless, I found him very helpful and willing to explain the current institutional viewpoint. Subsequently, I decided to include a teaching union perspective by interviewing a former TUI official who had been actively engaged in the events that triggered this project. That interview marked the end of the first round of respondent and informant interviews.

I began a preliminary analysis of the 24 interviews I had by then conducted by listening many times to the recordings I had made on a digital voice recorder and by writing a summary of each one. Never having had any experience of conducting research interviews, I had been very nervous at the outset that the technology would function as required, although I had practised using it several times. Unfortunately, within several minutes of the start of my first interview, with Tony (a pseudonym), a group of porters entered the room we were using and proceeded to move out all the furniture – noisily – except for the chairs we were sitting on and the table that the recorder was balanced on. For fear of stopping and starting the recorder and finding out later that it had not recorded Tony’s narrative fully, I continued with the interview and Tony soldiered bravely on through the noise. This was not the most auspicious start for a novice interviewer – fortunately, when the recording was uploaded onto my computer the sound was not affected and the summary was written up like all the others, although I always laughed to hear the background noise of chatter among the porters and the screech of chair legs across the wooden floor. I also worried that the disruption had affected Tony’s responses but felt that the second interview I conducted with him six months later would give him the opportunity to give a more reflective account and counteract any distortions. While I attempted to find a quiet place for the subsequent interviews, which were all held in institutional settings, several more involved interruptions. The difference was that I now trusted my technology and could stop and start the interviews smoothly, when required.

A feature of many of the interviews I conducted for this project was that they did not begin and end when the digital recorder was switched on and off. In the case of some of the managers, who had given me a particular time-slot for the interview, there was just time for a brief preamble and my explanations of the project often took place as part of the recorded interview itself. In contrast, with many of the German lecturer respondents I often had a lengthy conversation before switching on the recorder and even more so once the recorder

had been switched off. This was partly due to the stance I had adopted towards the practice of conducting life history interviews. I had considered using the biographical narrative interpretative method (BNIM) espoused by Chamberlayne (Chamberlayne et al 2000, 2002) and Wengraf (2006) but rejected it because it required a collective approach to the interpretation of the interviews based on grounded theory, and I was a lone researcher, and because it tended to emphasise psychological rather than sociological explanations (Wengraf 2006). What I did like about the method was the open structure it allowed for in a first interview, something also supported by Goodson (2005), who advises not to prepare for life history interviews too much. By not supplying questions in advance, as some respondents had requested in order to prepare themselves for our interview, I was able, as a reflexive researcher, to take part consciously in the construction of the life history narratives of my German lecturer interviewees as they took place.

The recorded interviews typically began with an open question, such as 'tell me about how you came to be a German lecturer and how the recent changes have affected your perception of your professional identity' and proceeded with questions by me as prompts to the respondents to expand in greater detail on the issues surrounding their professional experiences. After reviewing the first six respondent interviews I realised that I had not always got a clear definition from each person regarding how exactly they defined their professional identity – I therefore emailed them to ask how they described what they did and received several responses, some of which I quoted in my analysis, as appropriate.

I was always conscious that I did not want to cause difficulties or provoke anxiety for my respondents – some were clearly editing their narratives while the recording was going on and were much more revealing of their feelings, and often frustrations, when the recording had stopped. Because of the ethical duty I owed to these individuals I decided not to include most of these asides (except for a few anonymous examples to illustrate the power relations between the interviewees and myself which I will discuss below). I saw the summaries of our interviews as a form of contract – in the sense that 'this is the information I will include, not anything else that may have transpired between us'. When I later sent each of the interviewees a copy of their individual interview summary I invited them to comment or correct any misapprehensions on my part. A few respondents replied to correct factual misunderstandings and the HR manager asked me to amend any impression that he was commenting on events that took place before he had been employed at his institution. The duration of the interviews ranged from about 22 to 52 minutes and ended when I felt that no

new material was being produced and we had reached saturation point on the issue of changing professional identity and the events that engendered it. The summaries were on average two to three pages in length and included occasional direct quotations from the interviewees, wherever these appeared particularly expressive or pithy.

For the second round of interviews with nine of the ten respondents from one IoT this time the interviews were more structured and directed towards answering questions that sought to map the lecturers' accounts onto Bourdieu's concepts according to a matrix that I had devised as part of the analysis of the first round of interviews. (The matrix and analysis will be discussed in the next section.) I also prepared questions specific to each interviewee in order to explicate gaps in their career trajectories that seemed apparent from the first interview. Conscious of the intrusion (Bourdieu et al 1999) of returning a second time to people who had busy professional lives I said from the outset that the interviews would be short (about 15 minutes) and that I would provide a full transcript in order to show where I would be drawing the bulk of their quotes from in the thesis. At this point I feared that some respondents might withdraw from the project if they felt that they had been too open and critical – fortunately for me, no one did. I emailed similar questions based on the matrix to the six German lecturers from the other institutions but did not contact the three former part-time lecturers or the five informants for any further information.

Copies of the interview transcripts were sent out with a covering letter which drew out one further discussion point from each interview and invited the respondents to comment on my analysis of this point. Two respondents commented briefly on the points I had raised and another wrote an extensive and reflective response on the evening after our interview. Two more respondents, whom I met several months after the second round of interviews, passed general comments about the transcripts but did not put these in writing.

This, then, was the extent of my primary data; the boundaries had been fixed and the next stage was to work with what I had been given in order to provide a meaningful analysis of the changes my respondents had made in their professional lives and how these changes were affecting their professional identities. Secondary data sources included institutional documents, such as quality assurance and review documentation, minutes of meetings and institutional policy and position papers, as well as information and policy documentation from Irish academic staff organisations, the IoT sector and the national and European higher education policy fields.

### **Writing the story: analysing the data**

On one level data analysis is synonymous with data collection itself. The process of collecting, and constructing (Bourdieu et al 1999, Guéranger 2009), interview data involves the simultaneous process of understanding and analysing what is being said. It is essential to the 'non-violent communication' (Bourdieu et al 1999, p. 610) that should take place between the researcher and the respondent but, equally, between the researcher and the reader of a research project that the 'intentions and procedural principles' (ibid p. 607) should be explicit at all times. The social proximity and familiarity between the researcher and interview respondents must be reflected in the analysis that is produced. I attempted to do this by placing myself within the same analytical space as my respondents and by including a socioanalysis of my own experiences, both personal and professional. I kept in mind Bourdieu's precept that the researcher must attempt to provide an objective perception of the people being questioned while avoiding objectifying them (ibid). At all times my 'point of view' in analysing the data of the interviews was to 're-produce the point of view of [the interviewee] and constitute it as such by resituating it within social space' (ibid p. 625).

To do this I needed to take a somewhat different approach to that outlined by Bourdieu in *The Weight of the World* (Bourdieu et al 1999) where he and his colleagues concentrated on collecting interview data. While I had found Bourdieu's advice (ibid, pp. 607-626) enormously helpful for conducting interviews, my analysis needed to find a way to combine this data with the material I had gathered from secondary sources to allow the reader to situate him- or herself in the social space of my respondents' views.

I therefore adopted an approach provided by Warren and Webb (2006, 2007a, 2007b), that draws on Bourdieu to move beyond the individualising tendencies of life history research so as to connect individuals' habitus to the social structure that affects their lives, what they term 'recursive methodology' (2007b). Here data collection and analysis become an iterative and reiterative process as the researcher constructs a series of narratives that derive from a first interview; the analysis of that interview; a second interview that takes account of this analysis; interviews with informants that throw light on the social structures that surround the respondent and the analysis of documentary evidence to add to a fuller understanding of the forces at work in the field of power. Each layer of narrative deconstructs and reconstructs the original life history and the habitus of the respondent under the objectifying gaze of the researcher.



Following this methodology my summaries of the first round of interviews with German lecturers and former lecturers became the first narrative layer in the recursive process. In preparation for the second round of interviews with lecturing staff I analysed the interviews again, this time from the perspective of how Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, field and reflexivity could be observed at work in the narratives. A second set of narratives was thereby produced and from this I derived a number of themes that were common to all the respondents and that required further exploration. I compiled six general questions, mapped to the issues on which I required elaboration from the respondents and to how Bourdieu's concepts were linked to the notion of professional identity, which I called an interview methodology matrix.

I used this matrix to ensure that the second round of information-gathering would provide details that were directly linked to my conceptual framework. For example, I hoped that more targeted questioning would allow respondents to use their own reflexivity to think about and express their views on their professional identities; on how their previous life history and experiences (their habitus and capital) had affected their ability and willingness to change; on how their institution had helped or hindered them in adapting to change and in shaping their professional identities, changed or otherwise. I also planned to use the contrasting experiences of lecturers from different institutions to build a case for the argument that different social spaces created different possibilities for those who were positioned within them. In the end, once I had come to the conclusion that I would need to include a large amount of material about myself and my experiences in my own institution, there was not enough space and time left to explore this issue to its fullest extent and a number of the interviewees were only touched on briefly in the thesis.

Before deciding to include myself, however, I still hoped to elicit from the second round of interviews accounts that would delve willingly into the personal histories of my respondents and help to explain the formation of their professional and academic habitus from their personal trajectories. In discussion with my supervisor the idea emerged to try to shake up the interview experience and engender a new kind of dialogue. My plan was to conduct the second interviews sitting beside rather than opposite the interviewees so that I could use a more graphic representation of the questions I wanted to ask. During the interviews I drew a circle to represent identity and asked them to mark how much of this circle was taken up by professional identity, how much by other types of identity. I then drew a time line representing their careers and asked that they consider times when they had encountered or

initiated change and whether they had behaved in the same way or differently than they had during the changes we were discussing. While all the respondents answered these questions, most did not seem comfortable with pursuing the topics back into the personal realm. Not wanting to impose symbolic violence on my interviewees I withdrew my questioning to the professional arena.

Recalling this experience brings me to a brief discussion of the power relations at play within the interview situation. Many writers have drawn attention to the idea that, by instigating the research and conducting the interviews, most of the power is in the hands of the interviewer (Goodson and Fliesser 1995, Scott and Usher 1996, 1999, Schostak 2002, Goodson 2005). While not wishing to appear naïve as an insider researcher in the 'pursuit of innocence' (MacLure 2003, p. 103) I did not always feel that this was true in my case. When interviewing managers who were higher in the institutional hierarchy than me, although they were always friendly and helpful, the fact of being occasionally kept waiting before an interview or the interruptions during some of them certainly balanced out any power differential that control of the questions and the voice recorder may have given me.

In the case of lecturers I encountered several examples of individuals resisting any perceived power imbalance. One example was an interviewee who was so hesitant and evasive when I tried to open out the discussion beyond professional identity that I knew the subject must be dropped. Once the recorder was switched off she expressed her discomfort but later sent a very open and informative email when she had reached the comfort zone of her own home and had time to reflect on the process. A second interviewee, with whom I was chatting after our second interview, burst out laughing when I admitted that the results of my research would hardly have any noticeable effect on her professional life – I had been at pains to equalise our status by acknowledging that my research could not affect her, while she made it clear that such an outcome would be ridiculous anyway. A final example was the response of a third interviewee on meeting me after he had received a copy of his first interview summary: he made a cat snarling noise and a clawing gesture which I took to mean that he felt that the critique he had voiced had actually come from me, and that I was being catty. It was a funny gesture but I was shocked that an interviewee might think I was skewing his views – on the other hand, this interviewee did not pursue the matter further and was even more critical in his second interview, of which he received a full transcript. The point being made here is that all the interviewees who took part in this process took the opportunity, to a greater or lesser extent, to voice opinions that had not been elicited previously. They may

well, as Bourdieu has pointed out (Bourdieu et al 1999), have been closer to mastering the interview situation than I was as the interviewer. Overall, I was very grateful for their generosity in sharing their time and thoughts with me and hope that a sense of ‘fair trade’ (Goodson and Fliesser 1995) prevailed.

One final opportunity presented itself to get further comments from respondents when I sent their second interview transcripts with a covering letter and a copy of the interview methodology matrix. By including the matrix I wanted to show where the questioning for the second interview had derived from and give them a chance to get involved in the analysis of their own stories (Merrill and West 2009). While two people did answer an individualised question pertaining to their professional identities, no other comments emerged.

Returning to the recursive analysis, the first two narrative layers, the second interview transcripts and the institutional informant interviews and secondary documentation were now used to begin to construct a further layer of analysis that would shed light on the structural background to the stories of my respondents. At this point it was necessary to consider how the thesis was going to be put together and how the different layers of analysis could be brought together in a way that would prove interesting and accessible for the reader. I began by separating out my own autobiography from that of other German lecturers. Using Bourdieu’s (2007) sociological approach to autobiography I wrote an account of my personal and professional trajectory and, employing the recursive methodology of Warren and Webb (2007b), I interwove my story with historical and structural accounts of the higher education field and the institutional field where I had spent a large part of my professional life and where my professional habitus had been formed. The personal and institutional changes that had taken place over the previous decade were analysed through the conceptual prism of habitus, capital and field, with reflexivity as the key analytical tool.

Having taken a similar approach to the large quantity of data produced from 24 interviews, nine re-interviews, email responses and a wide range of documentation, I was anxious to, in Bourdieu’s words (Bourdieu et al 1999, p. 624), ‘provide the reader with tools for a comprehensive reading, a reading capable of reproducing the stance that gave rise to the text’. In my autobiographical chapter I had started from myself and worked outwards so, to avoid a sense of repetition and predictability, I decided to approach the remaining data from the outside in. Looking at the fields within fields in which the professional habitus of my respondents was constructed I began with the largest field and worked my way in to the field

closest to each individual habitus. Starting with the field of European language policy I moved on to the national higher education field and the sectoral field of the IoTs before coming to the institutional field itself.

When it came to the description and analysis of the individual stories of my respondents I divided these into four groups: those who were willing to change; those who were resistant to change but who eventually responded to institutional pressure; those who were not required to change their professional identities and, finally, those who had been part-time lecturers and who, on losing their jobs, had no choice but to change. These changes ranged from teaching English or other languages, communications, intercultural studies or computer applications to studying law or librarianship. In transcribing, summarizing, commenting on and analysing my respondents' accounts I concentrated on the content rather than the form or the performance of the interviews (Elliot 2005). While MacLure (2003) argues that literal quotations in texts are an attempt to imitate the 'real' (p. 159) and therefore a form of fabrication, I preferred to take on board Bourdieu's view that using interviewees' speech can 'provide a more accessible equivalent of complex abstract conceptual analyses' (Bourdieu et al 1999, p. 623) and therefore used many direct quotations. It was my view that, having taken the time to be interviewed, the respondents deserved to maintain the agency of their own voices. Even if the resulting account was ultimately my construction, it allowed in part for the articulation of a discourse 'which might never have been spoken, but which was already there, merely awaiting the conditions for its actualization' (ibid p. 614).

Finally, although I had set out on a project that would present a comparison between a number of institutions and show the influence of fields and social spaces on the habitus of individuals who were obliged to change, this was not exactly what was produced. The wish to find a way to explore the functioning of habitus caused me to include a chapter on myself and left insufficient room for all the data I had gathered from a number of institutions, although that information did inform my discussion of the IoT sectoral field. What I did produce, in the main, turned out to be a case study of one institution and the structural forces that had affected the professional lives of many of the German lecturers currently and previously employed there.

As defined by Stake (2005) case study research is 'not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied' (p. 443) while Eisenhardt (1989) defines it as 'a research strategy which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings' (p. 534). Case

study research allows for a combined approach to data collection, taking in archival material, interviews and observation and for multiple levels of analysis (ibid). The historical, social, and cultural contexts are often taken into account and the multiplicity of sources and perceptions allows for triangulation of the case. Such research also facilitates the conveying of the experience of the actors involved because researchers concentrate on the subjective data of participants and witnesses (Stake 2005). All of these factors were present in my research but where mine differed from the case study research described by Stake is that my analysis was not bounded completely by the institutional setting. By looking at the policy fields beyond the IoT I focused on I was able to analyse where some of the structural forces at work there had their origins and what outside forces might cause future change in institutional language policy. On the other hand, my use of Bourdieu's theory to explain the interaction of agents and institutional structures can be seen as a method of theory testing, with Bourdieu himself having employed a form of case study research to build the theory (Eisenhardt 1989) of habitus, capital and field that derived from his early study of the people of Algeria (Bourdieu 1990).

### **Conclusion**

Returning to the metaphor I used in the title of this paper, the 'chest of drawers' I intended to construct at the outset of my research project was not exactly what I ended up with. Changes that were made throughout the process included adding a chapter about my own experiences and the structural supports and barriers that affected my professional choices; reducing the number of interviewees whose accounts were examined in detail from the original 19 spread across six institutions to a final 13 concentrated in one particular IoT; I also omitted the intended comparison between IoTs and concentrated more specifically on a case study of one institution as it became clear that the scope of my research was becoming too large for the time and word count allowed.

What I did construct, however, was a series of stories of individuals coping with change to their professional identities; an analysis of the choices they made and of the structural forces that affected these choices. The numbers involved were sufficient to give a sense of the changes that had taken place in the area of German teaching across the IoT field over the last decade. I was also able to show some of the effects of the Irish higher education policy field on language teaching in third level institutions and the background of the European policy field that supports foreign language teaching but is not itself supported in the Irish field. Using Bourdieu's 'methodological toolkit' I created an object that was different but

recognisably similar in nature to what I had intended – ultimately, this is perhaps the best that a researcher can hope to achieve from a project of such length and duration. Not only did I employ Bourdieu's concepts to analyse my data but his advice on how to conduct interviews as an insider allowed me to maintain an objectifying gaze in the collection of the data itself. To quote him one final time:

Sociologists cannot be unaware that the specific characteristic of their point of view is to be a point of view on a point of view (...). And it is solely to the extent that they can objectify themselves that they are able, even as they remain in the place inexorably assigned to each of us in the social world, to imagine themselves in the place occupied by their objects (...) and thus to take their point of view, that is, to understand that if they were in their shoes they would doubtless be and think just like them. (Bourdieu et al 1999, pp. 625-6)

Thus, as an insider researcher, I found that I had unique insights into the choices made by my respondents. Nonetheless, their individual responses to the field they found themselves in differed from my own and had, at all times, to be taken into account when trying to convey their stories. Expressing and mediating their point of view in as truthful a way as possible, while clarifying the background structure that made their choices almost inevitable, became an essential goal of my thesis and one I hope I have been able to carry out successfully.

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