

**SENIOR SELECTION INTERVIEWING:  
FROM INDIVIDUAL SKILL AND INTUITION  
TO *HABITUS* AND PRACTICE**

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## **Abstract**

Research into choosing individuals to fill positions at or near board level in organisations is scarce; however we know that interviewing is the dominant selection practice. The research into selection interviewing at junior and middle levels is extensive. Overwhelmingly it takes the form of scientific (typically psychological) studies of independent, interacting individuals understood in either rational agent or stimulus-response modes.

This research narrates the author's involvement as an expert adviser to the board of a UK non-profit in the selection of their chief executive. The narrative material is interrogated using the concepts of *habitus* and practice as developed by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. This work builds on explorations of power, skill and intuition which use further narratives of the author's experience as an interviewer and a leader, and also a participant in the management doctorate programme at the University of Hertfordshire. Previously the author worked for eighteen years in executive search.

The author argues that both the practice of senior selection interviewing and its theorisation are damaged by too narrowly scientific a discourse which neglects substantial strands of relevant scholarship (for example within broader management studies, sociology, critical theory and philosophy). Behavioural competencies and transferable skills – bedrock concepts in contemporary human resource 'best practice', including selection – are called into question.

The author experiences the practice of senior selection interviewing as stuck, caught between cynical and scientific interpretations of itself (that is, self-interested power play and disinterested measurement). Neither perspective yields a productive dialectic. The ideas of *habitus* and practice open a different understanding which does not simply reject the preceding perspectives but attempts to advance beyond them.

The interpretation of senior selection interviewing as the product of radically social human agency is a new contribution to theory which aims to ‘unstick’ practice. Bourdieu’s thought is used practically and in its multiple, interlocking aspects (*habitus*, field, symbolic capital, *illusio* and misrecognition); working with isolated elements or only abstractly has, in the author’s view, limited some earlier interpretations and critiques. These tools for better understanding practice are compared with sense-making as developed by Karl Weick, which is not radically social but more familiar to English-speaking management scholars.

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **1.1 My experience**

I joined the Doctor of Management programme of the University of Hertfordshire's Complexity and Management Centre in June 2007, towards the end of eighteen years engaged in executive search. I was almost 50 and exploring new career directions.

After a first degree in mathematics from Cambridge and a master's in statistics from Harvard, I had spent ten years in the 'fast stream' of the British Civil Service, working mainly in H M Treasury. This included a year at the Civil Service Selection Board (CSSB), a national centre of excellence in assessment. The centre selected graduates with the potential to reach senior levels in public administration. The centre's work was research-based, well respected and scientific in orientation. I absorbed the ideal of assessing candidates objectively, with interviews as one element alongside written, group-based and other selection tools.

By contrast when I moved into executive search the emphasis was commercial. Candidates had to be found and often persuaded, as well as assessed. Making a sufficient number of clients happy was my goal and the key to my financial livelihood. Interviews were often the only selection tool.

I will shortly give a picture of the executive search industry (section 2.2): for now I note that between 1989 and 2007 I progressed from being a consultant to a director and then deputy chairman of an executive search firm which grew from 15 to about 45 staff. On average during that time the firm ranked approximately tenth (by turnover) among search firms in the UK.

My recruitment experience has been of a wider range of client organisations than most executive search consultants – international, private sector (large and small), government (large and small), NHS, charities and universities. At various times I led my firm in its government, health, charities, finance and diversity work, and in some of these the firm built a national reputation. In more than 70% of cases I worked on

vacancies at board or senior executive team level. I estimate that I conducted over 7,500 interviews and advised on filling well over 1,000 positions. In practical terms, I became an expert. This research asks, what did that mean?

In 2007 I was also recruited as non-executive chair of a national charity with about 300 staff. In my thirties and forties I had served as treasurer of charities with about 15 and 50 staff.

I did not bring a clearly formed question to this programme of study; however I did bring a perception. Something about senior recruitment – recruitment at or near board level – which was broadly consistent across the private, public, non-profit and academic sectors seemed to me important, not written about and different from the recruitment at middle and junior levels on which selection or interviewing ‘best practice’ was based. But what, I could not articulate.

## **1.2 This portfolio of work**

Each of Projects One to Four examines narratives of my experience as an interviewer, a leader or – in a few cases – a novice researcher. The projects were written over three years in the order presented here.

Project One is preliminary. In it I take the first steps towards a critical understanding of my professional practice. The subsequent projects are longer and develop themes which were unknown in advance but emerged step by step from the research itself: power, skill and intuition, and finally the logic of *habitus* and practice.

Each project came about in the same way. Working in a learning set of three students with a supervisor, I wrote successive (between five and nine) versions of each project. In each iteration the narrative material was confronted with wider literature and learning set discussions, which took place over nine two-day learning set meetings as well as by email and telephone. These discussions led me to think and write differently, to shifts in theme and in which literature appeared most relevant, and gradually towards the argument which emerged as the backbone of the project.



A very difficult shift for me was how much, and in what way, to be present in the text. Whether to use 'I', or whether to express my feelings? I started out most comfortable in impersonal disguises (the scientific white coat). This tendency never completely disappeared; it alternated with explosions of intense subjectivity. Now I would say what I have struggled towards is a text in which at least two people and their feelings can be present – I and you. The struggle never finishes, but without the generous effort of those who read successive versions, it could not have started.

In addition to the nine learning set meetings, in the first eighteen months there were also five five-day plenary sessions of all the faculty and learning sets. These were often intense. They accelerated my engagement with literature and sharpened my capacity to think about what happens in everyday interactions.

Finally this introduction and the synopsis were written. The latter discusses the main themes that have emerged in the work and the line of argument they represent, appraising them critically and taking them further. I highlight some of those themes now, to focus attention on patterns of change within and between the projects which strike me as significant to the argument which emerges.

That argument concerns the practice of selecting by interview senior executives – individuals in organisations at or near board level. The dominant thinking about selection interviewing comes from studies and experiments conducted mostly at junior levels and within the conceptual framework of psychology (particularly behavioural psychology). I will argue that this practice of senior selection is stuck – resistant to improvement whether from inside or out. My claim will be that central to this stuckness is the ideal of improvement which both practice and theory take for granted. This ideal is scientific objectivity.

In this way of thinking, when we interview someone we measure them. Then we compare the interviewee's relevant qualities (inexactly measured) with the requirements of the position (also inexactly measured). This research is not about inexactitude but how we go awry when we think of these processes as measuring anything at all.

The intellectual dominance of scientific thinking in our society is such that it is natural to ask: if scientific objectivity goes out of the window, is every opinion or judgement (in this case about candidates) no better than any other?

Against this I will argue that interviewing is a complex social practice which needs to be joined to wider debates in the humanities – for example about the nature of human thinking and being, about power and about ethics. Particularly important is the work which has been done by sociologists to develop concepts of objectivity appropriate to the activity of people studying people. To make this argument, and to show the gains in understanding interviewing which become possible, I will particularly take up the work of Pierre Bourdieu.

The relationship of this argument just summarised to the projects which follow also differs from that found in the physical sciences. Using the scientific method (widely understood as a rule-following method), both method and a specific proposition are stated in advance; information is then gathered to test predictions. Here, experience is explored from which both argument and method emerge untidily.

Again the question arises: if science goes out of the window, is every opinion or judgement no better than any other? Does this research have any objectivity or purposefulness? The projects lay bare my grappling with this question with a concluding discussion of method in section 6.7 in the synopsis.

### **1.3 An invitation to explore**

This thesis is an invitation to join in the exploration of experience. I invite you to bring to this work, as I bring mine, your experience and understanding of several things: among them, interviewing others and being interviewed for particular roles; management and leadership (since my focus will be on senior roles); relevant discourses; and research. I start with no experience of the last of these.

Bringing our different experiences to common material, we are likely to notice different things but with some overlap – in the same way that, writing this at the end,

what I notice now in earlier projects differs but with some overlap from what I wrote about originally. In highlighting three of those differences now, I hope to open up further for you the experience of thinking with me the material which follows.

Firstly, the changing use of *narrative* across the projects. These shift from short and fragmentary to more sustained and central to the inquiring thrust of each project. The nature of that thrust also shifts: in Projects Two and Three something I find surprising or puzzling in the narratives propels the inquiry; in Project Four the inquiry struggles as much with the apparently straightforward as with the puzzling. There is a shift towards the ordinary. The ordinary is more difficult to explore but potentially more rewarding, because it cloaks what we take for granted and do not see.

Secondly, the invitation to bring your experience will turn out to be much too narrow. Of central importance will be our shared experience as *thinking, acting human agents*.

Thirdly, many times the projects encounter, explore or assert a dividing line between what I shall describe as atomic and '*radically social*' thinking. What is at stake here?

Social thinking is commonplace in the sense that few of us are devoted to the study of shipwrecked Robinson Crusoes. But in contemporary economics and significant parts of sociology and psychology, and certainly in everyday life, we take it that 'society' refers to and is to be explained in terms of individuals who want things, do things and interact<sup>1</sup>. Interdependencies, possibly complex ones, may develop in such thinking but the individual remains the pre-eminent and prior unit, or atom, of explanation.

Put another way, in such thinking the individual is ontologically prior to society. Radically social perspectives, which will be introduced in Project Two but not taken up in full force until Project Four, deny this. They claim that each of us, individuals,

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<sup>1</sup>I am distinguishing two perspectives rather than categorising all perspectives: for example structuralists may want explanations in terms of (say) class or linguistic structures and may regard individuals as irrelevant.

you and I, are not atoms but always already social: we emerge out of interactions rather than the other way around.

Is this a question about the real world or the secular equivalent of a theological dispute? That struggle unfolds in this work. So one way to read these projects is as they were written, by someone for whom the distinction just made starts out somewhere in the alarming terrain between the numinous and the barking mad - although of course I was much too nervous to say so at the outset. This struggle reaches a particular crisis at the end of Project Three.

But it might be fruitful to do an opposite reading at the same time, taking radical sociality as a given. This means reading the projects asking why does this shift take so long (not until Project Four)? What really changes?

Finally, throughout this thesis words italicised within quotations were always italicised (or otherwise emphasised) in the original unless otherwise stated, with the exception of *habitus* which I have italicised as a foreign word wherever it appears.

## **Chapter Two: Project One - Contrasting Experiences of Involvement and Detachment in Leadership and Recruitment**

### **2.1 Introduction**

In this project I will present three narratives from my experience and explore reflexively both the sense which I made of them at the time, and that which I am now beginning to make as a result of my participation in the Doctor of Management programme at the University of Hertfordshire.

Within each of the narratives, my attempts to act were failures. By ‘failure’ I do not mean that, if somehow the same scenarios could be presented again, I would necessarily do anything differently. I mean that the word ‘failure’ is aptly used given that each time I did not achieve something which I was trying hard to achieve, and after which I experienced emotions of frustration, impotence or shame.

The first concerns my experience of strategy-setting as a leader in a consulting (executive search) business, and unfolded over about four years after I became deputy chairman of my firm in 1999. The second, shorter, narrative, describes a project to recruit a chief executive for a major British professional institute; the key actions unfolded over approximately six months. The third and briefest narrative describes an experience on the first five-day residential module of this doctoral programme.

Since two narratives in this project and a substantial narrative in Project Two concern the work of executive search, I will briefly introduce that field of work.

### **2.2 Executive search firms**

Executive search is a highly competitive segment within the wider, sprawling recruitment industry. *Executive search firms*, which range from multinational businesses to one or two person boutiques, are paid a mainly committed fee<sup>2</sup> by

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<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere in recruitment, reliance on contingent fees (paid only after the client has hired an individual) and putting several recruitment firms to work at the same time on the same vacancy make difficult the development of any professional relationship with the client. Recruitment with those characteristics is often described in the industry as ‘bodyshopping’.

client organisations to identify, attract and assess relevant candidates for positions which are hard to fill.

Why hard to fill? Mainly because the pool of good out-of-work candidates is (or is perceived to be) thin. Commonly the present leadership effectiveness of candidates already in strategic leadership roles would be damaged if it became known that they wanted to move on; such candidates frequently do not respond to advertisements. The cost of search may also be incurred because: the hiring organisation's position is challenging and requires advocacy; the vacancy (or some key factors affecting it) cannot be advertised publicly; experienced advice is desired in identifying different candidates' strengths and weaknesses; there will be many candidates but diplomacy in the handling of distinguished unsuccessful candidates is important; or, sometimes, organisational vanity.

Executive search has low, or no, barriers to entry (anyone can start a firm tomorrow). However to work at senior levels usually requires a substantial track record, which can be a high barrier. Fees are often a proportion of the hired individual's likely annual cash remuneration. More generally the industry has pro-cyclical boom-and-bust characteristics. It has some of the characteristics of an embryonic profession, including a voluntary international professional body and a limited ethical code<sup>3</sup>.

In Britain the clear trend over the past two decades has been for organisations (and their shareholders or other controllers) to perceive a widening organisational impact from having 'exceptional' instead of 'adequate' leadership – witness the widening differentials between top and average pay<sup>4</sup>. In step with this financial rewards in the search market have expanded.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://members.aesc.org/eweb/DynamicPage.aspx?webcode=codeofethics> (accessed 20 March 2010)

<sup>4</sup> Between 1980 and 2002, the multiple by which the total pay of the highest-paid directors exceeded that of ordinary workers in FTSE 100 companies increased from 10 to 50 (Froud, Johal, Leaver, & Williams, 2006, p. 58)

### **2.3 Narrative 1: putting strategy into practice**

When Andrew<sup>5</sup> the older of the two founding partners of my search firm retired, as is common with old friends and valued business colleagues, he retired in stages.

Nevertheless around 1999 there was a clear break when Andrew ceased to be chairman, a director, a consultant, an employee and a shareholder of my firm, all of which he had been until that point. I was invited by his business partner Bill to become a shareholder and deputy chairman. I paid for a ten per cent stake. In buying out the rest of Andrew's shares, Bill gained control of more than fifty per cent of the company. In any case Bill was the largest single revenue-generator for the firm, with the commercial power which that implied.

Becoming deputy chairman was a big deal. Neither for Bill nor for me was this a routine progression. Bill could have chosen not to create such a role and left me as a director alongside other non-shareholding directors. Or he could have brought in someone from outside, for example by merging our firm with a smaller firm, whose head would naturally have become deputy chairman (Bill had a wide network of relationships with leaders of other search firms).

For me, what happened was an honour, a financial commitment<sup>6</sup>, an invitation to create a new kind of relationship with Bill and a considerable duty and responsibility as well as opportunity. I had recently turned 40. I cared a lot for the people who made up the firm and for the quality of the work which we did for our clients. Accentuated by my new role, I certainly cared about the impact which the firm's reputation over the coming 5-10 years would have on my own reputation. I labour these points to underline my intense involvement in what was at stake in deciding the strategy of the firm from 2000.

I also had a degree of detachment or objectivity in considering the position of the firm (and my own role). Historically the firm had not had a strategy. By strategy I meant, at the time, a written text, not necessarily long, which said where the firm was

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<sup>5</sup> The names of the individuals in this narrative have been changed for confidentiality.

<sup>6</sup> Since my remuneration was largely driven by client fees, the change did not mean a significant increase in salary or bonus.

trying to go and how we hoped to get there<sup>7</sup>. If asked, Bill would answer that since its creation in 1986 the firm had grown by about 20 per cent a year and our strategy was to continue to do that.

Andrew and Bill had driven the firm largely intuitively. ‘Strategy days’ of the whole firm took place each autumn, overnight and the following day at a castle in Kent. They were an important feature of community life. But they were not about strategy. Sometimes they were entirely idiosyncratic; once we flew an American author over for two days to teach us to write haikus.

I believed that the firm would perform better in commercial terms if it had a short strategy: in particular if we had some measure of our market and brand position. I also thought that, provided Bill and I (and other directors) demonstrated commitment to the strategy in actions and decisions, and engaged in honest dialogue about the strategy with members of the firm, having an explicit strategy would contribute to the next stage in our maturation as an organisation. This would be to move beyond a paternalistic model of leadership in the firm (with Bill and myself as the ‘parents’).

But considering the position and history of the firm realistically, any strategy which I could help bring about would need to be very short and simple, and to have some real commitment from Bill (as well as myself and others). I considered that the most significant choice we had to make, lying beneath the surface of any strategic words, was whether, as an innovative quality firm lying in the lower reaches of our industry’s top ten, we wished to work hard to win some of the most prestigious commercial assignments which were presently a little beyond our reach. Or did we prefer to place our focus on ourselves as a community, on building our values, and perhaps less stressed lives?

With all the care that I could command, quietly over a period of time in one-to-one conversations, I explored with Bill this choice. I had some preference for the more ambitious course, but could be very happy making either work. I spelled out that the

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<sup>7</sup> In the next section I turn in more detail to the concepts of strategy and leadership implicit in my thinking and actions.



least attractive position to me would be that we embarked on the first choice because we thought that as red-blooded commercial executives it was what ‘we ought to want’, if in fact we were not willing to follow through.

This least attractive position was exactly what we did. Believing that we had chosen privately to raise our firm’s game, as the new deputy chairman I led an exercise in 2000 naturally involving others which produced ‘4 in 2004’, a short strategy with 4 points, fewer than 100 words and a measurable goal for the year 2004. By 2002, notwithstanding that we had been very busy fighting a major recession, I was convinced that whether or not Bill had willed ‘4 in 2004’ as an end, he did not will it as a means. We scrapped it. We needed to try again.

In the autumn of 2002 Bill and I spent a week at a leadership programme led by Professors Jack and Carol Weber at Darden Business School at the University of Virginia. The sessions were primarily experiential rather than theoretical. They surprised me by focussing critically on the importance of ‘conversations’ to leadership.

As a result I moved to a different concept of strategy. My concept of strategy had been a fixed text expressing which businesses an organisation is in and how it aims to succeed in those businesses, together with some assessment of the extent to which the text’s core is or is not made real in day-to-day business. I now began to think that this put the cart (text) before the horse (what people think). I changed to the conception that strategy *is* the pattern of conversations which take place in the firm shaping what businesses it is in and how it intends to succeed in them. The commitment horse may or may not be helped by having a textual cart.<sup>8</sup>

At Virginia I told Bill that, in strategy-setting terms, the previous two years had not been a success for me. Despite all care, I had been mistaken in concluding that he

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<sup>8</sup> I see this now as a shift towards thinking about strategy as a patterning discernible in (and only in) the collectivity of individuals’ actions, among these particularly conversations, and therefore a shift towards the perspective articulated by Ralph Stacey at Hertfordshire: ‘From a complex responsive process perspective, an organisation is evolving identity ... Strategy is the evolving narrative pattern of organisational identity’ ([1993] 5th edn 2007, p. 435).

was committed to our previous strategy: and I challenged him to write a new strategy himself, from his heart; to write what he believed. I thought it very likely that he would produce something to which I and others in the firm could commit; to move the firm forward, what we needed to believe was that he was committed to it. The programme also included anonymous feedback for us as leaders from our colleagues which encouraged me to persist in this strategic endeavour.

Bill wrote a short set of goals (which we called ‘the 5 Mosts’) which became our new strategy. I could indeed commit to them, and worked energetically over the following 2-3 years – with special attention to my changed concept of strategy and to the importance of conversations - to lead the firm forward on those lines. In my judgement the results of ‘the 5 Mosts’ for the organisation were positive, but less than they could have been, as was Bill’s commitment to them. I felt that I had failed.

## **2.4 First reflection on my concepts of strategy and leadership**

I turn now to consider, in the events just summarised, what concepts of strategy and leadership helped form what I thought and did? Unsurprisingly these were by no means specialised or unusual. To assist subsequent comment, I set them out in some detail, referring to two thinkers – Ohmae and Kotter – who influenced me at the time.<sup>9</sup>

My understanding of strategy at the start of my search career in 1989 was particularly shaped by the then chairman of McKinsey in Japan, Kenichi Ohmae. Several of his books on strategy were bestsellers in Japan, among them the book on which he based the American best-seller ‘The Mind of the Strategist’ (Ohmae, 1982).

Ohmae defines strategy as:

Actions aimed directly at altering the strength of the enterprise relative to that of its competitors (ibid., p. 37).

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<sup>9</sup> Needless to say, many other writers articulated consonant or complementary views; nor is what follows summative of either Ohmae or Kotter’s total work.

He sees what he has to say as ‘very personal’ and embodying ‘many controversial judgments’ (ibid., p. 8). He sees himself standing outside systems thinking, at least in its non-complex forms:

True strategic thinking thus contrasts sharply with the conventional mechanical systems approach based on linear thinking. But it also contrasts with the approach that stakes everything on intuition, reaching conclusions without any real breakdown or analysis. (Ibid., p. 13)

Locating Ohmae’s thought within a popular taxonomy of strategy (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 1998, pp. 354-359), Ohmae has a strong focus on analysing customers’ needs and the product market (Mintzberg’s positioning school) but with a bias towards creative entrepreneurialism and a strong antipathy towards planning:

It is not unreasonable to say that many large US corporations today are run like the Soviet economy. (Ibid., p. 3)

Within this conception of strategy, what should leaders do? According to Ohmae: use the full broad and deep potential of the human brain (the mind of the strategist) to identify creative new ways forward in the marketplace; be analytical; be courageous; and inspire many others throughout the organisation to think and act similarly.

This emphasis on the role of strategic leaders in fostering broad and deep thinking and courageous action throughout their organisations – everyone a strategist, one might say – matches well the thrust of the book on leadership by Jim Kotter at Harvard which was also formative for me (Kotter, 1988). Kotter contended that more turbulent, faster-changing, more competitive markets required much more, and more widely distributed, leadership than top-down US corporations were typically in a position to provide. It is worth briefly following the development of his thesis and then making some connections with Ohmae.

Kotter begins:

There is no generally accepted definition of leadership. For the purposes of this book, leadership is defined as the process of moving a group (or groups) in some direction through mostly noncoercive means. Effective leadership is defined as leadership that produces movement in the long-

term best interests of the group(s). This definition is generally consistent with those used by Burns, Jennings and other thoughtful writers on the topic. (Ibid., p. 5)<sup>10</sup>

He goes on to identify effective leadership as requiring an inclusive vision, an intelligent strategy, a supportive network and a committed core team (ibid, p. 20). He sees more effective leaders throughout organisations at all levels as vital to success in more turbulent market conditions. The culmination of his book emphasises what we might call ‘everyone a leader’:

The business environment today has, in a sense, democratized leadership, making it relevant not for the few but for the many. (Ibid., p. 133)

## **2.5 First reflection on power**

Already a question is apparent: does ‘everyone a strategist’ or ‘everyone a leader’ actually make sense? I will explore this further through the management literature which influenced me, and then return to confront these questions with the experience I have narrated of strategy-setting.

Starting with Ohmae and Kotter, why does a market environment which requires many more problems to be solved faster, more creatively and throughout an organisation require *distributed leadership* as opposed to *distributed problem-solving capability*? The latter, arguably, is Ohmae’s vision (everyone a strategist); but many of these problems will be cross-cutting, so that localised solutions will frequently create conflicts. Kotter also leaves this point unaddressed. It is unclear how conflicts are to be resolved if every part of the organisation invests in improving its skills at persuading other parts of the organisation.

The fundamental issue here is power. What impact can rank-and-file members of an organisation hope to have not only on each others’ decisions and actions, but on the largest decisions and actions? Can they, for example, seriously affect their leaders’

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<sup>10</sup> Along with others, Kotter was instrumental in drawing the distinction between leadership and management which became popular during this time. He sees the tools of management as generally controlling or coercive. (Ibid., pp. 21-24)

visions and proposed strategies? After all (as pointed out in critical vein by Douglas Griffin at Hertfordshire) in the dominant discourse on management:

The action of leading is located in autonomous individuals, the leaders, who become the objective observers of organisations as whole systems and the formulators of visions and values which provide the leadership according to which such systems are to unfold their future (Griffin, 2002, pp. 205-206).

This accurately describes the role I was attempting to play.

The issues about power left unresolved in naïve approaches to empowerment produced some detectable shifts in management literature, though no deep resolution. I give two examples from books which influenced me.

Jim Collins' 'Good To Great' (2001) is one of the last in the 1980s/90s series of popularised studies of strategy through *ex post* statistical analysis<sup>11</sup>. Collins had been a Stanford faculty member and co-author with Jerry Porras of a preceding statistical blockbuster (Collins & Porras, 1997). Although Collins gave his research team instructions to 'downplay the role of top executives' (*ibid.*, p. 21), the study's first conclusion turned out to be the importance of Level 5 leaders who:

... build enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will. ... [By contrast a Level 4 leader] catalyzes commitment to and vigorous pursuit of a clear and compelling vision, stimulating higher performance standards. (*Ibid.*, p. 20)

This shift (which Collins describes as new and unexpected) entails, in the reference to humility, some more profound degree of listening by the strategic leader: a leader whose authority and whose vision are not preserved pristine 'outside' the organisation 'in' the big picture, but are more embedded and vulnerable within the organisation's changing conversational life.

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<sup>11</sup> From an initial population of 1,435 US companies derived from the Fortune 500 lists between 1965 and 1995, by successive statistical cuts a core 11 were found which demonstrated 'fifteen-year cumulative stock returns at or below the general stock market, punctuated by a transition point, then cumulative returns at least three times the market over the next fifteen years' (*ibid.*, p. 6). Sector effects were eliminated and each company compared with a pair chosen to be as similar as possible but without the arrival of stock market outperformance. The 'transition point' is of course an *ex post* statistical artefact.

This theme is taken up much more explicitly by INSEAD professors W Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005). Their ‘blue ocean’ strategic thinking is remarkably kindred to Ohmae’s; both stress that on sufficiently close and creative inspection, profitable strategic opportunities may be found in unprepossessing places. Thus Kim and Mauborgne open with the example of the declining circus industry (where they consider Cirque du Soleil). But, at first sight, they address very explicitly the conflict issue which Ohmae sidesteps. Thus Kim and Mauborgne stipulate that an essential feature of making successful radical strategic moves in practice is ‘fair process’, which entails employee engagement, explanation and clear expectations. Critically, engagement must encourage ideas (including management’s) to be refuted publicly on their merits (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005, p. 175). Moreover:

By organising the strategy formulation process around the principles of fair process, you can build execution into strategy making from the start. With fair process, people tend to be committed to support the resulting strategy even when it is viewed as not favourable or at odds with their perception of what is strategically correct for their unit. (Ibid., p. 184)

But a considerable degree of contradiction seems to me to remain present in the thinking of these authors. Elsewhere in their book they significantly undercut the possibility of leaders and their visions being changed by the led. For example they talk at length, with extended reference to Bill Bratton’s leadership of the New York Police Department from 1994, about ‘tipping point leadership’ through which leaders instrumentally deliver ‘a fast change in mindset that is *internally driven of people’s own accord*’ (ibid., p. 152). As described this is considerably manipulative and well within the systems paradigm in which free thinking and moral choice belong to strategic leaders standing outside organisations populated by objects for manipulation. Notwithstanding this qualification, to identify and give ‘fair process’ a prominent role in strategy is a notable development and a pointer to continuing tensions.

The tension is underlined by the sense I now make of my experience in Narrative 1. I entirely failed to address the question of whether the pattern of power within the firm

to which Bill was committed was freedom of action unconstrained by any fixity of strategy (even if the strategy had been entirely of his own creation). This interpretation of mine does two things: it places power at the centre of our field of vision rather than at the periphery; and it raises the question of whether monarchy is intrinsically undiscussable in many modern organisations? Even if it were in some sense agreed, can one in fact put monarchy ‘on the table for rational discussion’ between the implicated parties? This was what I attempted to do in the consulting assignment which I now summarise.

## **2.6 Narrative 2: a chief executive succession**

PA, a leading British professional association with substantial international and business operations, had grown dramatically in size and reputation. Its workaholic chief executive for more than the past ten years, Patrick, was now approaching retirement. It was, for example, very active in launching and delivering novel (and cash-generating) programmes and qualifications in China, India and Africa, as well as playing a significant role along with other British associations in this profession not just in the UK but in the G8 and similar fora. As with most British professional associations, governance (including the appointment of the next chief executive) was in the hands of a large and unwieldy elected board, further weakened by the constitutional rotation of officers into and out of the position of chair once a year. Along with three or four other search firms, we were invited to submit a proposal for the recruitment of Patrick’s successor – including a timetable and all key steps for making the decision, including the evaluation of any internal candidates. All these were sensitive issues. In addition, the commercial success of PA meant that the board attached a lot of importance to the effectiveness of the search in attracting dynamic, international, commercial and other candidates of stature who might ordinarily consider the chief executiveship of a professional association too dull.

Already, without having met Patrick, I had sufficient experience to identify as potentially important the possibility of a too-powerful incumbent. If this possibility materialised and the incumbent in fact dominated the process of attracting and selecting their successor, I had many scars with which to identify serious problems which could arise.

When we made our presentation to the relevant committee, it was not a surprise to see Patrick sitting alongside them (silent, but clearly influential). That, too, was familiar and could be turned to advantage. Politely but bluntly, after covering other more predictable issues, I made clear our strong view that while an incumbent had a critical role to play in certain early stages of the process, it was inappropriate for him to be involved in short-listing, final interviewing or the committee's final decision. Normally the presence of an incumbent during such a presentation was an advantage. If we failed to persuade the committee members or if the incumbent was more powerful than the committee and wanted to be involved in the final stages, then one of our competitors would be given the assignment. In one sense all this could not be simpler or more rational: having gained sufficient experience to learn certain lessons, by placing these (including the possible issue of a powerful incumbent) on the table before our services were contracted, then – problem solved.

Not so. My firm was appointed. The search was international and creative, and took several months. A high quality international field was identified. Throughout these stages Patrick behaved impeccably. As the final stages approached, this rapidly changed. Previous rational discussion, recalled by our strong representations, failed to stop Patrick at short notice pressuring the committee to let him sit in on their interviews and deliberations. I failed to stop PA's chairman giving in to him. Shortlisted candidates felt constrained by Patrick's presence from presenting in a frank way their analyses of PA's shortcomings, and were concerned by this departure from etiquette. Although things were now tense, the job was offered to an individual who accepted it and resigned publicly from a high-profile position. A few weeks later he 'unresigned' and took his old job back; Patrick had already made his designate position intolerable. Another firm was engaged to carry out a fresh search. Months later, that also resulted in an individual resigning (and in this case actually starting in his new role as chief executive); only to resign from PA brief weeks later, for similar reasons. The cumulative damage by this stage to PA's reputation was considerable. On the third attempt, Patrick left and the position was filled by an internal candidate.



In relation to this narrative, I draw out in the next two sections two themes.

## **2.7 Power and undiscussability**

The continuity of the theme of power between Narratives 1 and 2, and its importance in the second narrative, is clear. If the management literature so far explored is constrained in helping us to explore this issue, what other concepts may be more helpful?

Several concepts of power are valuably analysed by the sociologist Steven Lukes, springing from the core idea (which Lukes quotes from Dahl) that:

*A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do. (Lukes, 1974, pp. 11-12)*

However the term ‘power figuration’ introduced by the sociologist Norbert Elias suggests we consider power issues as universally present ones of mutual dependency, even in situations of apparently very one-sided power imbalance:

*From the day of his birth, a baby has power over its parents, not just the parents over the baby. ... But whether the power differentials are large or small, balances of power are always present wherever there is functional interdependence between people. ... Power is not an amulet possessed by one person and not by another; it is a structural characteristic of human relationships – of *all* human relationships. (Elias, 1978, p. 74)*

Thus in Narrative 2, my interpretation of PA’s ‘shameful secret’ (so to speak) is that it was as much about the weakness of the elected board as Patrick’s strength, and both co-operated to disguise both aspects for as long as possible. In Narrative 1, a possible line of inquiry opened up by Elias’ concept is in what ways, and for what reasons, may I have blinded myself to power issues? What was the function of such extended strategy discussions, set within a taken-for-granted conceptual framework within which issues of power were either not prominent or treated contradictorily? Was it to allow leaders wrongly to convince themselves and others that the questions most central to the organisation’s future were being identified and (at least to some degree) rationally or transparently resolved?

The fact of undiscussedness, the possibility of undiscussability, or alternatively (as in Narratives 1 and 2) the futility of apparent discussability, may either be consequential or proximate aspects of power in modern management contexts: clearly there are possible lines of inquiry here. At this stage I simply note a relevant connection which Lukes makes. Lukes called his study ‘Power: A Radical View’ because he argued that it was necessary to go beyond the evidence of domination or influence visible as a result of tangible conflictive acts:

... The bias of the system is not sustained simply by a series of individually chosen acts, but also, most importantly, by the socially structured and culturally patterned behaviour of groups, and practices of institutions, which may indeed be manifested by individuals’ *inaction*. (Lukes, 1974, pp. 21-22)(emphasis added)

... The crucial point [is] that the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent such conflict from arising in the first place. (ibid, p. 23)

The importance to me of the undiscussable may indicate why, as thinking developed particularly during the 1990s on the learning capability of organisations, I was particularly struck by the work of Chris Argyris (at Harvard) on organisational defences<sup>12</sup>. Argyris focussed on the need for successful organisational learning to overcome not simply ignorance but also deeply ingrained habits. He saw that these habits were intended to avoid embarrassment and that their work in doing this was, in general, undiscussable within organisations. He set out his aim trenchantly:

This book takes direct aim at organizational defenses. It uncovers what is often known privately in organizations about defenses but is bypassed and covered up. I want to make the undiscussable discussable. (Argyris, 1990, pp. xi-xii)

Finally, Narrative 2 differs from Narrative 1 in introducing recruitment as a practice. In this regard I am struck by the parallels between the description the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu gives of what happens in scientific research and the very similar pattern in recruitment decision-making:

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<sup>12</sup> By contrast, although Peter Senge’s ‘learning organisation’ became much in vogue and my firm was asked by some organisations to carry out searches to find people who could help them achieve this state of existence, those ideas had at the time little resonance with me. (Senge, 1990)

In short, scientists use two linguistic registers: in the ‘empiricist repertoire’, they write in a conventionally impersonal manner; by minimizing the references to human intervention, they construct texts in which the physical world seems literally to act and speak for itself. When the author is authorized to appear in the text, he is presented as either forced to undertake the experiments, or to reach the theoretical conclusions, by the unequivocal demands of the natural phenomena he is studying, or as rigidly constrained by rules of experimental procedure. In less formal situations, this repertoire is complemented and sometimes contradicted by a repertoire which stresses the role played by personal contingencies in action and belief. (Bourdieu, 2004, pp. 22-23)

But the dual truth of the experience that agents may have of their own practice has something universal about it. One knows the truth of what one does (for example, the more or less arbitrary or in any case contingent character of the reasons or causes which determine a judicial decision), but to keep in line with the official idea of what one does, or with the idea one has of oneself, this decision must appear to have been motivated by reasons, and by reasons that are as elevated (and juridical) as possible. Formal discourse is hypocritical<sup>13</sup>, but the propensity to ‘radical chic’ leads people to forget that the two truths coexist, with more or less difficulty, in the agents themselves ... . (ibid., pp. 24-25).

In the making and recording of recruitment decisions this dual discourse (of which only one has an official existence) is an immediately recognisable feature. It, too, points to a kind of undiscussability: the shared experience of many individuals that certain kinds of opinion, reasoning or data may only be discussed behind doors to which not every individual has the necessary keys.

## **2.8 Systems thinking**

My second group of reflections on Narrative 2 and Narrative 1 highlight the fundamental, pervasive and unremarked (by myself) nature of systems thinking. I draw here particularly on the critiques of systems thinking made by Stacey ([1993] 5th edn 2007) and Griffin (2002).

In his *tour d’horizon* of different types of systems thinking, the systems scholar Michael Jackson defines in this way the root concept which such kinds of analysis share:

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<sup>13</sup> I understand Bourdieu to use ‘hypocritical’ factually without implying malignity or fraud.  
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A system is a complex whole the functioning of which depends on its parts and the interactions between those parts. (Jackson, 2003, p. 3)

Systems thinking is extremely powerful and aptly applied to many problems in the physical and biological sciences. It has also been applied with dramatic practical success to important and difficult problems too numerous to mention - such as the behaviour of economic markets or the flow of traffic on roads – in which human agency is involved, but in such a way that modelling the phenomenon *as if* the agents were not human but embodiments of some decision or response function (such as utility maximisation) often proves worth doing. For example I used (or relied on others' use) of such tools extensively in working in the Treasury: they were fundamental. Cost benefit analysis; the assessment of capital adequacy for banks, and for the banking system; medical manpower modelling; the list is long.

To point out now in relation to the work which I did in the Treasury that much of it used systems thinking (and systems assumptions) does not change much my reflection and evaluation of what I and my colleagues were doing. At the time, if asked I might or might not have reached for 'systems thinking' as a relevant label; but that is a matter of labels. The substance was that we were all the time creating or using 'as if' models of complex human situations; they were always simplifications but, depending on their parsimony or complexity and cost, they could be worth looking at.

Quite different has been the impact of realising the extent to which as a search professional and a manager, working with essentially universal management concepts taught not only by practitioners but also by academics, I had imported unawares systems concepts into areas where not only is their application more problematic, but also the problematic nature of what I was doing (using 'as if' models which were 'wrong') was not kept prominently in mind. While often claiming to act from an explicit values base in exercising authority and influence over or on behalf of others, one which gave individuals respect, was I in fact doing so?

Relevant to Narratives 1 and 2 is the problem of boundary or frame, put by Stacey thus:

The problem of infinite regress is fundamental to all forms of systems thinking simply because systems thinking is built upon a conceptual spatial metaphor. It always involves postulating a whole separated by a boundary from other wholes. There is always an 'inside' and an 'outside'. Drawing a boundary creates an 'inside' which has to be different to what is 'outside'. This cannot be other than a dualism in which one kind of causality applies to the inside and another kind to the outside. There always has to be something outside the system that is drawing the boundary around it and what that something is must eventually be a mystery. ([1993] 5th edn 2007, p. 134)

A consequence of bounded or framed thinking about organisations as systems is that it becomes 'obvious' that setting strategy is a task for leaders who, as part of the strategy process, both ensure and demonstrate that they have 'stepped back', looked at 'the big picture', thought 'outside the box' and, having done all these things, bring back into the organisation the essential view of things from which correct strategy can be inferred. I have already quoted Griffin's articulation of this (see page 21). In this concept of strategy-setting leaders climb out of the frame to get the big picture, which they then bring back into the frame (inside the system) on the path to action and 'implementation'. Such leaders act in movies which they also direct, with the causal duality pointed to by Stacey that outside of the frame they think freely and make moral choices, whereas the inside of the frame is populated by objects for manipulation.

The ways in which I took part in leading (unawares) from this perspective in the events of Narrative 1 included not just what I thought strategy was as well as my responsibilities as a leader for shaping it; but also my constant questioning of myself (outside the frame) of what I could do to induce Bill (inside the frame) to identify his 'real' choice; and of course the close association of strategy-forming with going away (for example to Darden) or awaydays (castles in Kent). In this way of strategy-setting, perhaps awaydays have an almost performative function. Their enactment certifies to people in the company that their leaders have indeed climbed out of the frame and seen different views from them.

Narrative 2 is to me now a vivid account of an intervention proceeding from the fundamental viewpoint (though in no sense the specific detail) of soft systems methodologies, developed by such thinkers as Peter Checkland, originally of Bell Telephone Laboratories. He considered that systems engineering did not take sufficient account of messy human realities, including unsurfaced and clashing worldviews. Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) was a next step which approached these problematic situations systematically. Surfacing and articulating differences, iteratively as necessary, SSM offers:

... An organized process in which the real situation is explored, using as intellectual devices – which serve to provide structure to discussion – models of purposeful activity built to encapsulate pure, stated worldviews. (Checkland & Poulter, 2006, p. 22)

This has the happy result that

Given the frame of mind outlined above, any problematical situation in human affairs may be tackled with some confidence. (Ibid., p. 168)

It is important to be clear that Narrative 2 was not an application of SSM; rather I am noting the confidence in rationality and discussability on which SSM relies, and expressing misgivings.

### **2.9 Narrative 3: an incident in the formation of this doctoral cohort**

In June 2007 the nine members of the doctoral cohort of which I am one met for the first time as a complete group. Faculty were also present. The occasion was the programme's first five-day residential module. The timetable made clear that one and a half hours in the afternoon of the third day would be used for the nine of us to form ourselves into learning sets of three without faculty intervention.

Notwithstanding that my work requires developed social skills, I thought right away that this session was likely to be difficult for me, for reasons akin to being picked for teams in school games. I was aware of what a rational, game-theoretic approach would be to the situation, including using the opportunities of all sorts of conversations with other participants during the first two and a half days to assess

their potential fit. I expected that in some of the conversations which might have ensued, 'would we be a good match in a learning set?' would be an explicit topic, while in others it would be concealed. I very strongly did not want to spend the first two days with my fellow researchers operating with this instrumental mindset, and rejected this course.

When the session began, I was feeling nervous and distressed. My proposal that we form the learning sets by lot was rejected by the faculty and not taken up by other cohort members. Then for the best part of an hour there were nine of us in a room, with the faculty apart in a corner. My eight fellow cohort members stood and moved to talk to each other, forming small conversational figurations and then changing these every so often. I felt emotionally paralysed and physically did not wish to be part of this activity, though nor did I want to walk out. I sat, rather than stood; I pushed my chair to the fringe of the group, half turned away and (as I recall) sometimes read a newspaper.

One cohort member has since told me that my self-excluding behaviour was not obvious, but to me it was obvious and an excruciating experience. I 'knew' that 'all I had to do' was to stand up and join whatever conversation might be going on nearby. Reflecting on the experience I do not think I can meaningfully distinguish between whether 'I' was not willing to stand up and do that, or whether (short of a fire breaking out in the room) such a movement of limbs felt impossible.

Some cohort members came to speak to me. With these I spoke but also said that the session was causing me significant distress. All the time, without knowing the time, I was conscious of time moving towards a climactic moment when, as happened, the director asked us to try to form sets by sitting together. Two members approached me and asked if we could form a set together. I was relieved and grateful to be put out of my misery. Within a few minutes I was able to function normally again. I am very happy in my learning set.

## 2.10 Involvement and detachment

Involvement and detachment are significant themes arising in all three narratives. It is not simply systems thinking but the scientific method, if transplanted incautiously into social studies, which contends that truth is to be accessed by an emotionally detached (and materially disinterested) observer – or the closest alternative to this which circumstances allow. This presumption is so widespread that one or two examples from this project will suffice: thus, the two linguistic repertoires identified by Bourdieu (see page 27), or by comparing Narrative 2 (a consulting episode) with Narrative 1 (a leadership episode).

Commonly consultants are taken to be *detached* neutral arrivals, impartially chosen; and if a sense of my greater detachment was apparent in Narrative 2 compared with Narrative 1, then that may also have helped me to tell the story more briefly, because of a greater implicit trust on the reader's part (I am speculating).

By contrast, leaders are expected to be *engaged* – leaders are usually not credible if not apparently engaged. Engagement involves emotion, passion and possibly material interest (hence stock options attempt to align the material interests of commercial leaders with those of their shareholders). However, it is normally also considered desirable for leaders to be knowledgeable; and since detachment is thought to favour this we encounter again the systems duality in which leaders climb out of the frame of their situation in order to be objectively well-informed, but return within the frame in order to be convincingly, sometimes dramatically, engaged.

In undertaking this research, I will be attempting to hold together detachment and engagement at the same time (rather than sequentially, as the concept of the frame implies). Sometimes the attempt to do this fails, and the consequences for the individual may be paralysing. This is what I recount in Narrative 3 – in some detail not only so that the reader may sense the level of affect involved, but also to point to the physicality of what I did: trying, at real cost although not quite whole-heartedly, to climb 'out of the frame' of people and chairs, with a boundary policed by the faculty, a whole figuration in which I felt deeply threatened by lack of power.



Central to reflecting on this is Elias' detailed treatment in 'Involvement and Detachment' (1987). Elias considers that humanity's first mode of relating to the world was engagement, dominated by magico-mythic thinking in which everything and anything might have a purpose towards or against oneself. From this emerged detachment, and more specifically scientific detachment, providing the basis for the major advances in knowledge of inanimate and non-sentient matter.<sup>14</sup> But he suggests that in the social sciences, a further step is required *on the grounds of realism*:

... the hypothesis which played a dominant part in the traditional philosophical theories of knowledge: the assumption that the point of departure for all theories of knowledge is a subject-object relationship. ... I have tried to show that this step towards greater detachment does not go far enough. It represents one to oneself as if one existed in isolation, as a *wirloses Ich* – an 'I without a we'. (Ibid., p. 57)

Descartes gave the signal: *Cogito ergo sum*. What can be more absurd! Merely in order to say it, one had to have a communal language; and why say it if no-one was there to listen, to accept or to reject it? (Ibid., p. 14)

## 2.11 Looking forward

This project gives rise to many questions. But a central one, affecting both the content and the form or process of this research, is what alternative is possible to systems thinking, to subject-object knowledge, and to leadership by climbing out of the frame?

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<sup>14</sup> Elias also uses the example of Edgar Allan Poe's story 'A descent into the maelström' (ibid., pp. 108-109) to illustrate the possibility of paralysis.

## **Chapter Three: Project Two - Power and silence: a reflexive exploration through involvement and detachment**

### **3.1 Introduction**

In Project One I made an initial exploration of my experience of leadership and recruitment. In this exploration, power and undiscussability began to emerge as one theme. I also became more aware of the systems basis for my thinking about leadership, in which from time to time I pictured myself stepping ‘outside’ my organisations to formulate strategic perspectives and appropriate goals. This introduced the theme of involvement and detachment; in particular, the treatment of this by Norbert Elias (1987).

Now I will take this work further in two ways. Firstly, I will explore power and silence. In the next few paragraphs I set out why. Secondly, in doing this I will encounter or return to the theme of involvement and detachment. Asking with increasing reflexive intensity of this research as I carry it out, ‘What am I doing? What of my exercise of power and silence in the very creating of this research? How shall I now go on?’ will open up questions of research method.

Over eighteen years as a search professional I have conducted a lot of senior interviews (Introduction, section 1.1). Over 70% of these were at board or senior management team level. Compared with the specialisation typical in executive search, my experience spanned an unusually wide range of sectors and sizes of organisation. It is not, of course, ‘representative experience’<sup>15</sup>. But it leads me to inquire more deeply into power and silence. Although power is one of the defining issues in senior management and leadership roles – and it affected my practice deeply (for example the chief executive succession in Narrative 2 in Project One) –

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<sup>15</sup> I can point to some biases in my experience compared with the general population of senior UK vacancies. These biases reflect the client’s decision to use executive search at all, then the decision to use my firm, and then the decision to use me. Biases of which I am aware include the majority of my clients being in the public or non-profit sectors; a large part, and possibly the majority, of my candidates being in the private sector; a minority of the searches being international; and a significant proportion of the positions filled being new or innovative.

in helping to choose over 1,000 leaders, mention of it was infrequent. Full, candid discussion of its ramifications was unheard of.

I will now point to a pattern relevant to power and silence which I notice as present in all parts of my career, in different sectors and sizes of organisation, and at different rungs on the power ‘ladder’ (section 3.2). This pattern – which might be limited to parts of educated British society - is concerned with how we so organise matters that the powerful have their wishes acted on even before they have uttered them. I confront this in section 3.3 with an opposite narrative, a narrative of failure in which over a two year period I was impotent. This was in one of the most powerful leadership roles which I have held, and in which I brought into play all my understanding about leadership at the time.

This leads me to ask more closely, what is power? To explore this, I offer an initial naïve analysis and critically reflect upon it (section 3.4). Then I will take up insights from other thinkers (section 3.5) and reflect on these in the light of my experience (sections 3.6 and 3.7). I will then ask the questions ‘What am I doing? What of my exercise of power and silence in the very creating of this research? How shall I now go on?’, and so make a reflexive turn into questions of method (sections 3.8 and 3.9). Finally I will draw together for reference what I have suggested about power and silence (section 3.10).

### **3.2 ‘Lip-reading’: one pattern of power and silence**

By ‘lip-reading’<sup>16</sup> I mean paying such focused and habitual attention to the superior or other that on significant occasions the subordinate experiences the wishes of their superior before any gesture by the latter.

In calling attention to lip-reading I am pointing to patterns of social reward and recognition in the environments in which I operated, and which extended across public and private sectors and large and small organisations. I am therefore pointing to lip-reading as an ideal socially re-created on a wide scale in which subordinates are rewarded for enacting rapidly and without reflection.

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<sup>16</sup> Or one might say ‘mind-reading’ – but ‘lip-reading’ draws more explicit attention to the use of metonymy. ‘Mind’ often is taken to exclude the body.

I start with a commonplace in the voluntary sector. A few weeks ago I was in a meeting with the recently appointed chief executive (Tom) of a national charity. A question was put to the senior management team. Charles, the most relevant team member responded. Then the chief executive said, ‘Charles has, like any good senior management team member, anticipated what I wanted to say.’ The words passed without notice or comment; they were taken as words of routine approbation. The routineness, the naturalness, of the ideal which the chief executive was putting forward – that the job of senior management team members is to anticipate his thoughts – is my point.

In the private sector, as a search professional lip-reading was a daily drill. The job of consultants is to lip-read clients. According to this view, by anticipating clients’ wishes and, where possible, turning them into reality before they have been spoken, one creates ‘customer delight’. Delighted customers, ones whose expectations have been not only met but also substantially exceeded, become your fans and powerful generators of your brand or reputation, and of your future business. If a customer has to make an explicit request, then its fulfilment is more likely to create customer satisfaction (meeting expectations) than delight (exceeding them). In business this marketing jargon is commonplace: again, its banality is my point.<sup>17</sup>

But the pattern of lip-reading was deep in me and my environment long before I joined the private sector. Since the point of the foregoing examples has been their ordinary, everyday quality, I will recount an experience which was unusual and intense.

In 1987<sup>18</sup> I worked in the Treasury, which considered itself an elite department built on fundamental principles of conserving public money. I moved to a job in which, as

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<sup>17</sup> Oliver, Rust and Varki concluded that ‘unexpected high levels of satisfaction or performance initiate an arousal → pleasure (positive affect) → delight sequence’. (1997, p. 311) An example in typical business use today is ‘Delighted customers are those where you anticipate their needs, provide solutions to them before they ask and where you are observing to see if new and/or additional expectations are about ready to be required’ <http://www.customerdelight.com> (accessed 27 February 2008).

<sup>18</sup> The audit report to which I will refer was considered by the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee on 1 April 1987.

a result of decisions taken and legislation passed some years earlier, a policy was pursued in relation to trustee savings banks (now the 'TSB' part of Lloyds TSB) which became controversial. Among other things it was suggested that the Treasury might not have considered carefully enough the complex ownership of these banks and, as a direct result, perhaps allowed £1 billion of taxpayers' money to 'go walkabout'.

There was an investigation by the National Audit Office. At that point it became my job to obtain the relevant files from the archives and give them to the auditors; and, of course, to read them before doing so. The files made a stack of paper about three feet high. In them I read for the first time how the policy which had become an Act of Parliament and which I had implemented had been made. It would have been extremely embarrassing if the Treasury, of all departments, had been careless with a large amount of public money.

In the files there was an exchange of minutes in which my predecessors had drawn the attention of the most senior official in the Treasury to the risk that, accepting legal advice in the way which they proposed to do, money which might belong to the public would escape into private hands. The senior official confirmed that he was content. Nothing could be more proper - except for the dates on those minutes: from memory, 23 and 24 December respectively. Anyone with half an idea of what senior government offices are typically like on those dates (a torrent of paper rushing in and out plus the odd festivity) might have wondered whether that exchange reflected careful and deep consideration.

I decided that it would be in the Treasury's interest if the auditors did not read those two sheets of paper. However, I was perfectly aware that it would have been illegal not to provide them to the auditors; I needed if possible to come up with something more creative. I decided not to ask my bosses what to do. To ask them would have meant making them aware of the exchange and my planned way of dealing with it. I felt that they would prefer, if possible, to remain ignorant. I resolved my ethical dilemma by putting 'helpful' marker flags for the auditors on all the most relevant papers within the three foot stack, but not on the two pages which I regarded as

sensitive. I handed all the papers to the auditors with the true if incomplete comment that I had flagged up some papers which seemed to me relevant. Whether the auditors never read the sensitive pages, or read them and found nothing amiss, I do not know.

If in organisations of many kinds it is customary for powerful figures to become the foci for extensive patterns of lip-reading, then we may expect a lot of influence to be exercised without words being uttered. Later I will consider much more substantially insights from the sociologists Robert Dahl and Pierre Bourdieu, but for now let me make some brief connections to this phenomenon. Bourdieu comments that at the most basic level of human interaction:

... The relation between two people may be such that one of them has only to appear in order to impose on the other, without even having to want to, let alone formulate any command, a definition of the situation and of himself (as intimidated, for example), which is all the more absolute and undisputed for not having to be stated. (Bourdieu, 1991a, p. 52)

Dahl's interest in power pays more attention to senior roles, but the point which he makes is consistent:

Let us suppose that even in the absence of any previous communication from the president to Senator *R*, or indeed any previous action of any kind by the president, Senator *R* regularly votes *now* in a way he thinks will insure the president's favor *later*. The senator calculates that if he loses the next election, he may, as a result of the president's favourable attitude, be in line to receive a presidential appointment to a federal court ... [but] his votes are not the result of any specific action by the president .... This kind of phenomenon is commonplace, important, and obviously relevant to the analysis of power. (Dahl, 1986, pp. 51-52)

### **3.3 Narrative 1: a failure of power**

I will now take up an apparently contradictory narrative in which despite having power and attempting to exercise it, over two years I was not able to get across a simple, express proposition.

The context is provided in Project One (Narrative 1) in which I described strategy-setting in the 45 person firm of which I was deputy chairman. The strategy which I was instrumental in creating circa 1999 was called '4 in 2004'. It was printed on cards and widely distributed in the firm, together with our mission statement and values, and it said

#### **4 IN 2004**

We aim to be one of the best search firms on the planet. To that end, by 2004 we will:

- (1) be one of the four search firms uppermost in the minds of UK business leaders;
- (2) be known for handling some of the most important and interesting searches in Britain, including some at the top of the private sector;
- (3) be recognised for the commitment, insight, candour and humanity of our people; and
- (4) – most days! – experience the firm as one of the most remarkable value-based communities in which we expect to work in our lives.

As I narrate in Project One, by 2002 we scrapped this and replaced it with a 'strategy' devised by my business partner Bill. We called it 'the 5 Mosts'. It was similarly printed and circulated and read

We aim to become: (1) the most thoughtful; (2) the most effective; (3) the most innovative; (4) the most ethical; (5) the most professional search firm in the world; and the most fun.

At the same time as we switched to the '5 Mosts', Bill and I had strong structured anonymous feedback (organised by Darden Business School) about the firm's experience of our leadership. I was experienced as able and inspirational but also highly controlling. Bill's pattern was different but with some overlap. In the light of this it was fundamental for me to approach how we might 'implement' the 5 Mosts in a more empowering way.

I came up with the idea (which Bill agreed) that we would invite volunteers from the firm to champion the 5 Mosts. This would be an influencing, not a line management

role, but one behind which I would personally commit to put my power enabling the champions to have access to resources. I also committed to opposing any micro-control of them by either myself or Bill. I intended, and spelled out, that my task was to create a genuinely creative space for action by volunteers. Importantly, the space would last for 2 years – so that there was time for people to discuss and act on more than superficial quick fixes. I sketched out a short role description, agreed it with Bill and got myself designated as the director responsible for this initiative and for briefing and liaising with the champions (if any came forward).

Nine colleagues from all parts and levels of the firm volunteered for these roles, and we added by invitation a tenth (a new consultant who had only just joined the firm, but an experienced executive with an MBA). So we had ten champions, who to some extent grouped themselves in pairs, one pair for each ‘Most’, and to some extent operated in a more cross-cutting way. I met with them to commission them; I stipulated that I wanted one half-day meeting with them, at a time of their choice sometime in the third quarter of the two year period; but otherwise I would not join their meetings, nor be copied on their emails, ask for progress reports or employ any of the other possible tools of micro-control. On the other hand, throughout I would be fully committed to our joint cause, and available to them at their initiative if they felt that their work was being inhibited by management decisions or actions, or lack of resources. I challenged each of them to set their sights high: to make a contribution which they would think worthy of recounting in a job interview later in their career.

I failed. The champions met, and they explored various low-level ideas. As I had expected, quite some months went by before they realised that the initiative was serious, and that I would not simply fill any vacuum with my own ideas. I did stick to my self-imposed brief. But the ideas of the champions remained pretty mixed and they quarrelled with each other. As I was later told, there was a cynical camp and a keen camp (though even the cynics had volunteered): the cynics stoutly maintained that the whole thing was a con and there was no way that the directors would do anything radical if the champions suggested it. It also never escaped from the orbit of the actual and perceived Bill/Douglas power struggle.



After the two year period of the champions initiative we sold 70% of the firm to an acquirer, and eighteen months later I left. As I left and after it, the firm's 'new generation' – several of whom had been champions – began taking the kind of initiatives which I had failed to empower (or motivate) them to bring forward earlier.

What I am putting forward is, for me, an experience of deep puzzlement, a quandary about the nature of power. Equipped with and motivated by feedback about micro-control, I designed an intervention which took that challenge head-on<sup>19</sup>. I ensured that I had, but did not simply rely on, formal authority: colleagues widely experienced me (as the feedback showed) as a powerful player within the firm. I pledged to exercise my power in favour of the creativity of the champions in a way from which it would have been difficult for me to resile. I thought I knew the weakest point of my action – I would be expected not 'to walk my talk'. I walked my talk for two years; and the whole exercise was fruitless. I did not move significantly in my own understanding of this puzzle until I was quite far into the reading on power which I began as part of this project, and to which I now turn.

### **3.4 What is power?**

Power is a large subject, and reading can become detached. I wish to sustain – and if possible heighten – my involvement *and* my detachment at the same time. To engage with this reading, I first sketch out and critique my own starting point for thinking about power (section 3.4). In section 3.5 I bring my thinking together with that of a range of other writers. Through this process my thinking changes, and in section 3.6 I make different sense of the quandary I have presented and notice changes in my practice as a leader.

Many thinkers about power have found it enigmatic. Lukes writes:

When we are interested in power – in studying, acquiring, maintaining, increasing, reducing or destroying it – what is it that we are interested in? Answering this question turns out to be far from simple ... . (1986, p. 1)

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<sup>19</sup> 'Feedback' and 'designed interventions' are, of course, highly systems-based ways of thinking – I use these terms because they are how I thought at the time.

As a way in to this complex subject, let me start naïvely and critique the result.

In Newtonian physics, the power of an agent is the amount of change which it can effect in the world (measured as work, or force multiplied by distance) in a unit of time. Echoing this, in a world of physical agents *A* and *B* without self-consciousness, I will consider the power of each to be the largest amount of change which it could effect in the world in a unit of time. Defined in this way, the power of an agent is both situational and dynamic. If in a field we have a dog and a rabbit, then typically the dog has greater power than the rabbit. In a few minutes it can rearrange the world to eliminate the rabbit, a change which the rabbit cannot match. The dynamic nature of the situation can be shown by noting that as a result of catching and eating the rabbit, the capacity of the dog to change the physical world in a unit of time might increase because of the rabbit's food value, or decrease, if the rabbit was diseased.

In human interaction this physical dimension of power does not disappear. Within a few hours the President of the United States could destroy large parts of the planet while I could not. He is more powerful than me. If persons *A* and *B* sit in a room, and *A* has a gun and *B* does not, then that remains a material aspect of their power relations whatever patterns of mutual dependency (to use Elias' sense of power referred to in Project One) may also exist between them. Physical power is naturally loud power, in that typically the successful exerciser of it gains strength from doing so loudly (deterrent effects).

However the move to a universe of sentient beings is transformational. Now meaning is also present and power gains additional space in which to operate, to bend others to its will or to be defeated. In addition to the power to rearrange the world we must add the power to rearrange interpretations of the world – which I shall call symbolic power. *C* makes a gesture; say, she writes a message to *D* on a piece of paper. If *E* burns the paper she exercises physical power. If *E* can change how *D* understands what *C* has written, she is exercising a power not available before the advent of self-consciousness. Symbolic power is naturally quiet power, in that typically the successful exerciser of it gains strength from discretion, camouflage or silence.

An elementary form of symbolic power is bluff. If something can mean something, of necessity between sentient beings it can mean something else. Between sentient beings with any kind of power relations, to be a horse necessarily includes the possibility of being a Trojan horse. This is the fundamental ambiguity of meaning in the face of power relations. Returning to *A* and *B*, *B* watches intently as *A*'s hand reaches for and grasps the gun. At exactly the moment when *B* experiences (or anticipates) the gun pointing at *B*, in other words the moment when the meaning of threat arises from the gesture-response of *A-B*, there arises the possible meaning of bluff: the gun may not be loaded.

On this analysis, the act of understanding (or of two people making meaning together) is intrinsically ambiguous and political. The meaning of a communicative gesture can never be singular: those of the powerful must be scrutinised especially intently for the possibility that they mean something other than their face value. To revert to a President of the United States, at the Republican National Convention in 1988 George H W Bush famously pledged, 'Read my lips! No new taxes!' only because of the seriousness of the possibility that he might have to raise taxes<sup>20</sup>.

Why, then, do single meanings seem natural to us, so accurately descriptive of much communication? After all, when someone says 'This is your glass of wine' often they are gesturing towards a glass of wine, not a glass of poison. In this sense the meaning made by two people in a situation of gesture-response may be suggestive of the phenomenon noted in complexity theory whereby, when low intensities of a stressor (say a form of power, such as heat flow) are applied to a situation, a single phenomenon is observed; but when stressed beyond a certain point, the phenomenon bifurcates and two or more solutions become possible.<sup>21</sup> When not much is at stake in the interdependence between two people or in their power relations, taking things

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<sup>20</sup> As he did in 1990, leading to the New York Post headline 'Read my lips: I lied'.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Read\\_my\\_lips:\\_no\\_new\\_taxes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Read_my_lips:_no_new_taxes) (accessed 27 February 2008).

<sup>21</sup> For example the discussion of pitchfork bifurcation, dissipative structures and self-organization by the Nobel laureate in chemistry, Ilya Prigogine. (1996, pp. 68-69) He is principally describing chemical reactions governed by nonlinear equations where a continuing disturbance such as a flow of a reagent or of heat (which I have called above a stressor) is applied to an open system to sustain it away from equilibrium.

at face value may make sense. Even so, the possibility of ambiguity and its exploitation is always present.

But, on critical reflection, my starting point does not go far enough. From a world of Newtonian physical agents I proceeded to introduce mind and meaning. While I did so in a social way in the limited sense that ambiguity of meaning and its possible exploitation as bluff only make sense in a world of at least two individuals, my underlying concept of mind and meaning was not social but atomic – as if a solo mind could arise, assign meanings to symbols for its convenience and then proceed to contemplate the existence or not of the universe (a principal stream of thought in Western philosophy). My initial analysis is also systemic in its approach, expounded from a viewpoint standing outside systems variously of dog-rabbit, *A-B* and *C-D-E*.

The most glaring deficiency resulting from these points taken together is that I have posited a discussion of power in the context of sentient beings, where there is physicality and meaning, but no purpose, motive or self-conscious desire. So, thus far, it is an analysis of power which might be of value in relation to animals and intelligent but undesiring robots, but no further. And yet purpose, motive or self-conscious desire are evidently intrinsic to a discussion of power in a human context. More than this: if mind and self arise in a social way such as posited by Mead (1934), then desire and unself-conscious motive (such as the dog's appetite for the rabbit) worked out in social interaction are necessary for the emergence of self-conscious selves; so the concept of a universe of 'intelligent but undesiring robots' may not make sense in its own terms, let alone serve as a domain for the exploration of power.

So now let me consider the study of power to be the study of patternings of cause and effect in human interaction which tend to increase (or to sustain at a relatively high level) or to decrease (or to sustain a relatively low level) the opportunities for thought and action of human beings. Within this I will pick out the following themes for comment<sup>22</sup>:

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<sup>22</sup> These themes may overlap. I am not proposing a definitional hierarchy.  
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- (1) *physical* and *symbolic* and *telic*<sup>23</sup> power, which are patterns of cause and effect discussed respectively according to the changes which they produce in the physical world, in meanings assigned to that world and in the purposes, motives or desires of individual human agents; and
- (2) conceptions of identity and interaction underlying symbolic and telic power which are *atomic* or *radically social*. A discussion of power which makes sense in and relies upon a Cartesian universe of solo minds I shall call atomic. These develop to include an interacting multiplicity (a system or society) of atomic minds with, usually, a sender-receiver model of communication between them. By contrast a discussion of power in which individual identity, meaning and motive emerges and is sustained in a fundamentally interdependent way I shall call radically social.

What happens when I bring this exploration of my own thought together with the wider literature?

### 3.5 Concepts of power – Dahl, Lukes, Foucault and Arendt

I will consider treatments of power which are atomic (the concepts of power as used by Dahl, Parsons and Lukes) and radically social (Foucault and Arendt).

#### 3.5.1 Dahl

Project One included the idea of the American sociologist Robert Dahl that:

*A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do. (Lukes, 1974, pp. 11-12) quoting from (Dahl, 1957)*

Dahl widens and formalises his discussion by formulating a discourse in which:

*... power terms in modern social science refer to subsets of relations among social units such that the behaviors of one or more units (the responsive units, R) depend in some circumstances on the behavior of other units (the controlling units, C). (Dahl, 1986, p. 40)*

Dahl's development of this can be illustrated by taking his discussion of ways of measuring power (*ibid.*, pp. 53-55). He suggests that there are broadly three ways of doing this: game-theoretic, specifically Shapley and Shubik's measurement of power

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<sup>23</sup> I introduce this term to identify an aspect of discussion which becomes significant with the introduction of Lukes' three dimensions of power on page 48, and with Foucault and Arendt.

within a committee of equal voters; Newtonian, attempting to quantify the ‘amount of change’ produced in one agent by the other; and economic, which extends the Newtonian to take into account opportunity cost. Thus:

Harsanyi has argued that a complete measure of power should include (1) the opportunity costs to *C* of attempting to influence *R*, which Harsanyi calls the *costs* of *C*'s power, and (2) the opportunity costs to *R* of refusing to comply with *C*, which Harsanyi calls the *strength* of *C*'s power over *R* ... [costs] to include psychological costs of all kinds. (Ibid., pp. 54-55)

The nature of agents (whether *C* or *R*) in this discourse is atomic – individual minds with unexplained desires which act on each other.

By expanding the complexity of interaction to focus on groups of agents, Alvin Goldman can offer quasi-mathematical formulations such as:

A person *S* has some power w. r. t. [with respect to] issue *E* if there is some group *G* such that *S* is a non-dispensable member of *G* w.r.t. *E* and the members of *G* have collective power w.r.t. *E*. (Goldman, 1972, p. 239)

We can be confident that Goldman's underlying concept of agents is atomic because he asserts:

The central idea in the concept of power, I suggest, is connected with *getting what one wants*. ... To say that *S* is powerful is not to say that he usually gets what he in fact wants, but that whatever he wanted he could get, no matter what he might happen to want. (Ibid., pp. 222-3)

At this level of complexity we can say that Goldman is discussing something with a systems dimension, but still atomic rather than radically social; as is for example Talcott Parsons in his definition:

Power then is generalized capacity to secure the performance of binding obligations by units in a system of collective organization when the obligations are legitimized with reference to their bearing on collective goals and where in case of recalcitrance there is a presumption of enforcement by negative situational sanctions. (Parsons, 1963, p. 237)

Power as Parsons has just defined it is limited to its physical and symbolic dimensions. Indeed by the nature of what is taken as an unexamined given (an atom) in these views – namely the individual agent – all these analyses are at their weakest point in dealing with telic power: how or why might an agent’s goals or desires change, and if they did, should that be regarded as free will or as succumbing to persuasion or propaganda?

### 3.5.2 Lukes

How does Lukes position himself in relation to these schools of thought? Preparatory to articulating his ‘radical view’ in his book of that title (1974), he says that there are first of all ‘one-dimensional’ views of power which involve:

... a focus on *behaviour* in the making of *decisions* on *issues* over which there is an observable *conflict* of (subjective) interests. (Ibid., p. 15)

This description would characterise the line of thought above from Dahl onwards. Lukes calls ‘two-dimensional’ the expansion of this perspective by, for example, Bachrach and Baratz, who underline the need to examine non-decisions as well as decisions – which is a form of paying attention to silence. Lukes sees two-dimensional concepts of power as expanded to include non-decisionmaking as well as decision-making but, in common with Dahl *et al*, there is a:

... stress on actual, observable *conflict*, overt or covert. Just as the [one-dimensionalists] hold that power in decision-making only shows up where there is conflict, [two-dimensionalists] assume the same to be true in cases of non-decisionmaking. (Ibid., p.19)

Several steps happen as Lukes moves to what he calls a three-dimensional view of power. Imagine examining the possibility of unfairness in a refereed football match. In the one-dimensional view we focus on when the referee blew his whistle and stopped play: we examine decisions. In the two-dimensional view, we also notice that the referee’s non-decisions (failure to blow his whistle after the tackle in the fifty-third minute) are also possible sites for bias. In taking a three-dimensional view, we notice that the whole playing field may not be level – that there are other,

particularly social forces at work which cannot be captured by focussing only on decisions and non-decisions. Lukes considers that both the one- and two-dimensionalists are following:

... Max Weber, for whom power was the probability of *individuals realising their wills* despite the resistance of others. (Ibid., p. 22)

For Lukes, this pays insufficient attention to the group level of behaviour and neglects the implications of telic power. Lukes proposes to judge whether telic power has been used in an abusive way by its results, ie according to its effect on an individual in relation to the individual's (supposed) objective interests. Lukes also considers both one- and two-dimensional conceptions of power to be overly focussed on conflict, actual or suppressed. The successful exercise of telic power may avoid or remove conflict; and, like Marx, he is not content to accept an agent's subjective understanding of what matters to him as an adequate expression of his real interests:

... Is it not the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have – that is, to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires? ... Is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things. ... To assume that the absence of grievance equals genuine consensus is simply to rule out the possibility of false or manipulated consensus by definitional fiat. (Ibid., pp. 23-24)

This, then, becomes Lukes' radical view of power, namely that:

*A* exercises power over *B* when *A* affects *B* in a manner contrary to *B*'s interests. (Ibid., p. 34)

Lukes has developed a systemic framework inclusive of physical, symbolic and telic power. A systems perspective is implicit in the supposition of a bounded whole and the possibility of an external, detached observer required to suppose the existence of agents' objective interests. The lack of radical sociality is also indicated by the continuing atomic nature of the agents under discussion.



So far, I do not experience this thinking as helping me to make fresh sense of my narrative. This reflects the extent to which my own approach to power was already systemic. It suggests to my mind that my initiative failed because I did not have enough capacity to enforce compliance with my goal; or that, having it, I failed to exercise it. Thus, well into the two years I had the half-day meeting with the champions which I had stipulated. I made no attempt to suggest that their individual bonuses would suffer unless they came up with more substantial results than I could then observe. Then and now my strong feeling was that this would be counter-productive. Lukes' radical step tends to intensify my quandary rather than reduce it: on any plausible interpretation of the champions' supposed objective interests, my initiative was in their favour. For example, they could have proposed that it was in the interests of the business to increase their pay, and I would have been morally bound to argue for a serious hearing of their case.

### 3.5.3 Foucault

I turn now to approaches taken by Michel Foucault and Hannah Arendt, which I understand as radically social. What we see in both of these approaches is a breaking apart of what was previously treated as atomic, namely the nature, purposes and desires of agents. The consideration of these as being social in origin opens up considerably the whole question of telic power.

Foucault wishes to make a change of approach. He writes:

... We can formulate the traditional question of political philosophy in the following terms: how is the discourse of truth, or quite simply, philosophy as that discourse which *par excellence* is concerned with truth, able to fix limits to the rights of power? That is the traditional question. The one I would prefer to pose is rather different. Compared to the traditional, noble and philosophic question it is much more down to earth and concrete. My problem is rather this: what rules of right are implemented by the relations of power in the production of discourses of truth? (Foucault, 1986, p. 229)

This problematisation means that Foucault is very much concerned with how patterns of power interact with what is voiced and what is not, and what is considered to be truth and what is not. Thus he goes on to emphasise:

We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth. (Ibid., pp. 229-230)

Foucault's perspective gives particular significance to the patterning of silence. Thus elsewhere he writes:

Silence itself – the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within overall strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses. (Foucault, 1984, pp. 309-310)

The absolute necessity in senior roles to regard silence *as part of communication* and to deconstruct it finds a strong echo in my experience. Pregnant silence is an important part of executive search conversations. For example, two months prior to resigning from my firm, I had a three hour breakfast meeting with Bill and the group chief executive to whom we had sold 70% of our firm. I intended this to be a final warning of my intention to resign. Once a leader states a serious intention to leave, his position is irretrievably compromised. Certainly Bill and the group chief executive realised this. So I judged that in a 'final warning' conversation I could not suggest an intention to leave. For the communication to succeed, I and my listeners not only needed to understand the words of disagreement and unhappiness which I uttered, but also the silence: the communication depended upon the listeners realising that no stronger words were available in the language to be said, without falling into stating the impossible. How surprised Bill and his colleague were when two months later I did resign, I do not know.

Foucault also favours:

... an *ascending* analysis of power, starting, that is, from its infinitesimal mechanisms, which each have their own history, their own trajectory, their own techniques and tactics, and then see how these mechanisms of power have been – and continue to be – invested, colonized, utilized, involuted, transformed, displaced, extended, etc., by ever more global mechanisms and by forms of global domination. (Foucault, 1986, pp. 234-5)

Note the shift in Foucault's perspective away from atomic *As* 'doing things' to atomic *Bs* which, however much systemic complexity was added, remained the hallmark of previously discussed approaches. Foucault argues:

Let us not, therefore, ask why certain people want to dominate, what they seek, what is their overall strategy. Let us ask, instead, how things work at the level of on-going subjugation, at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviours, etc. (Ibid., p. 233)

Clearly we are now in a world of processes where the very composition of who we are, and what it might be for us to want something, has become plastic and social; and the questions about telic power open up dramatically.

### 3.5.4 Arendt

Hannah Arendt is so concerned that we should see something quite new which enters the frame of discussion in this way that she prefers to restrict the term 'power' to this new thing – for example specifically excluding physical force, which she calls violence, from its ambit. Since physical coercion was foundational, part of the base case, of power in all previous discussion, this definitional move of Arendt's is perhaps rhetorically provocative. For example it enables her to set up power (in the Arendtian sense) and violence as *opposites* of each other, thus:

The extreme form of power is All against One, the extreme form of violence is One against All ... . (Arendt, 1986, p. 63)

Violence can always destroy power; out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience. What never can grow out of it is power. (Ibid., p. 69)

Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. (Ibid., p. 71).

If we ignore the rhetorical provocation to focus instead on what Arendt is pointing to, we come to an important insight.

For Arendt power refers to the fundamental importance of social, interactive creativity, the power to make a new beginning together, or the concept of social freedom. She says:

*Power* corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert ... . (Ibid., p. 64)

But we fail to grasp her meaning unless we realise the significance of action within her thought. Arendt does not use ‘action’ to mean switching on a kettle. Arendt distinguishes action from thought and labour. By it she means a socially originated freedom to act, to begin, to initiate the unexpected and unpredictable. This concept which she calls natality she contrasts with Rousseau’s concept of freedom as sovereignty (Arendt, 2000b, pp. 454-5). The centrality of the concept for her is plain when she says:

Action, with all its uncertainties, is like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin something new. ... ‘That there be a beginning man was created,’ said Augustine. With the creation of man, the principle of being came into the world – which, of course, is only another way of saying that with the creation of man, the principle of freedom appeared on earth. (Arendt, 2000a, p. 181)

What Arendt points out is that the classic picture of the efficacy of violence is mistaken. Classically – and in everything hitherto presented – it is as if:

... Violence were the prerequisite of power and power nothing but a façade, the velvet glove which either conceals the iron hand or will turn out to belong to a paper tiger. (Arendt, 1986, p. 66)

But Arendt asks us to notice how revolutions actually happen, and how the exercise of large-scale violence requires the consensual acting-together – the power, in Arendt’s sense - of a substantial number of people. In fact, she maintains that, unnoticed in the classical analysis:

Everything depends on the power behind the violence. The sudden dramatic breakdown of power that ushers in revolutions reveals in a flash how civil obedience – to laws, to rulers, to institutions – is but the outward manifestation of support and consent. ... No government exclusively based on the means of violence has ever existed. (Ibid., p. 67)

Arendt goes on to argue that:

Rule by sheer violence comes into play where power is being lost; it is precisely the shrinking power of the Russian government, internally and externally, that became manifest in its ‘solution’ of the Czechoslovak problem – just as it was the shrinking power of European imperialism that became manifest in the choice between decolonization and massacre. (Ibid., pp. 69-70)

This brings us to the fundamentally paradoxical nature of power (in my sense of the word rather than Arendt’s), as something which can be both utterly plain and deeply enigmatic – indeed the plainer, the more enigmatic. It also enables me to make sense of my quandary.

### **3.6 My own leadership and exercise of power**

The failure to empower which I narrated in section 3.3 perplexed me; now it seems rather clear.

Through the champions initiative I tried to create a radical social creativity within my business: in fact, Arendt’s concept of power. I wanted to will this into existence by executive fiat – while all but one of the champions were volunteers, I did not open their roles to any negotiation or evolution. Arendt suggests that while force can elicit obedience, what it cannot elicit is power in her sense (quoted above on page 52). An Arendtian analysis would also pay attention not just to the power of domination which Bill and I enjoyed in the firm, but the active social consent needed for that to

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be so. From this I might have considered more carefully whether, despite the stated feedback about micro-control, there was a preference for the status quo which continued until my departure removed that option.

From the perspective of communication, I am struck that over the two years I acted as if, provided my words were clear and my actions were consistent with them over a long enough time, they could only bear one obvious meaning. Had I been conscious then of the fundamental ambiguity of meaning suggested on page 43, then I would have grasped the grave weakness of relying on a sender-receiver model of communication when, according to this analysis, if there is anything in the envelope then at least two things could be in the envelope.

I might further have realised that while I had chosen an unusually distanced mode of acting in order to be unaccusable of micro-management, this mode excluded continuing conversation between me and the champions; and possibly conversation, for all its potential for misinterpretation, was the only way in which my intended meaning would arise. Mead's gesture-response suggests that meaning of any complexity cannot possibly emerge between human beings acting as if they were simply senders and receivers.

These reflections have accelerated a change in my approach to leadership for which seeds were also sowed in the emphasis on conversation at Darden and in Project One. These are a critical part of the approach which I have taken in my first year as chair of the board of trustees of a medium-sized charity. In this year, having been recruited from outside the charity, I have needed to establish how I would lead board discussions; to begin building (as I hope) a durable and trusting relationship with my new chief executive; and to be visible meeting front-line staff, volunteers and other players within our sector. I am much more conscious than before that, working in a particularly lively part of the voluntary sector, the 'power' which fuels our activities is Arendtian power. I can neither will it into being, nor direct its path. So far this has not meant, nor do I understand those I lead to want, a weak participation in the conversation between us – a weakness which might mean saying little or treating my positions and beliefs as disposable. Rather I am paying much more attention to

whether the exchanges I participate in qualify as ‘conversations’ – do I feel a quality of involvement and detachment which I experience as openness to what the other person has to say?

Taking up themes from Project One, I am also trying to catch myself when I operate from a systemic view (typically by asserting my view of a ‘big picture’), and preferring instead simultaneous attention to both involvement and detachment. Three weeks ago I gave a major speech for my charity in which I had sought to intensify simultaneously its involved and detached aspects. It was well received; the chairman of the conference said it made a strong impression on him because it was passionate and factual, ‘an unusual combination’. But these changes in my leadership practice cannot yet be regarded as seriously tested.

Looking backwards from a radically social perspective towards the Newtonian and atomic approaches with which I began, the latter seem to me related to the former somewhat in the way that tangents to a curve are related to the curve. The idea behind ‘the largest amount of change which [an agent] could effect in the world in a unit of time’ on page 42 in effect freezes for an instant an evolving social universe, and substitutes for the agent in question a replica which has the Cartesian capacity to decide whatever it wishes – thus Goldman’s ‘To say that *S* is powerful is not to say that he usually gets what he in fact wants, but that whatever he wanted he could get’ on page 46. In an analogous way, the tangent to a curve at a point is produced by imagining that at that point a particle following the course of the curve is freed to move in a straight line. Tangents approximate and provide information about a curve, but do not show how a particle following the curve would actually move forward. Thus Newtonian and atomic conceptions of power provide some information about social power figurations, and become more meaningful the closer reality approaches to the theoretical freezing and Cartesian insertion: in other words, when dealing with the terror induced by an arbitrary, psychopathic agent.

### 3.7 An emergent theme: inversion of power relations

From a quandary in my experience as a leader exercising power, I proceeded to explore a range of relevant literature. As a result my thinking about power became more complex and I have been able to make new sense of my experience. In this process have other things also shifted? I will point to one theme which has now emerged in my thinking. It springs from asking, what if we give closer attention to the telic power *of the led* to change what the leader wants?

Arendt challenges the *prima facie* relationship between strong and weak, as did Norbert Elias, introduced in section 2.7 in Project One. Elias invites us to consider power issues as universally present ones of mutual dependency, even in apparently very one-sided situations. This theme of alertness to possible inversions of *prima facie* power relations can be expanded considerably. Bertrand Russell spoke of ‘power behind the scenes: the power of courtiers, intriguers, spies and wire-pullers’ (1986, p. 27). Dahl points out that the successful anticipation of wishes (lip-reading) may reach an extreme point:

For in the limiting case of anticipated reactions, it appears, paradoxically, that it is ... not the king who controls the courtier but the courtier who controls the king. (Dahl, 1986, p. 52)

While I was pursuing a career as a civil servant, I chose to ‘want’ whatever within the rule of law the democratically elected government wanted. By ignoring what I wanted, I had better chances of increasing my power. When the Parliamentary committee hearing was fixed on the auditor’s report, all the (many) officials in the hierarchy between me and the official head of the Treasury – whose presence was statutorily required - were away or otherwise engaged. The team of witnesses examined by MPs was the official head of the Treasury, the government’s most senior solicitor and myself, an unusually junior official to take on such a role. Perhaps I read correctly that my superiors were content to be absent but their intentions guessed at. The reward for success (both in lip-reading and in handling any ‘difficulties’ in the files) would be a raised profile, a step towards promotion and increased power.



Changing what one wants in order to increase one's power chances is not just a phenomenon of courtiers of a particular type within the British Civil Service. An ambitious commercial executive may well set aside personal preferences in favour of better chances of promotion – for example giving a commitment to sell off a group's low-performing division, or conversely to stick with it come what may. There is a potentially self-serving aspect of self-negation.

The theme that the apparently powerless may not be so gains further traction if we revert to Project One's exploration of leaders not as extra-systemic super-agents, but as functionalising their leadership roles day to day in local situations of conflict and unknowing. Douglas Griffin at Hertfordshire (whom I quoted in section 2.5 in Project One), asks

Why is it that in the theories of leadership dealing with business organizations there is the marked tendency to extol leaders as something exemplary and apart? What I am arguing is that they are by no means apart – they are who they are only in the evolving context of local interaction ... . (Griffin, 2002, pp. 195-196).

Griffin suggests that by emphasising their apartness, leaders (and authors on leadership in the dominant tradition) reduce conflict and challenges to their power which leaders do not want:

In the work of the management and organization theorists [treated earlier] there was a central focus on harmony and striving to be a part of a functioning whole. ... Authors on leadership appeal directly to cult ideals and their systems thinking has the effect of covering over ideologies and splitting off tendencies to challenge power. (Ibid., pp. 196-197).

Might we posit the possibility *at the same time* of the inverse phenomenon, which could be called alchemy. Let us focus on ourselves as the led. Not so powerless as may appear, we may powerfully shape what our leaders propose as values, principles and strategies. We actually want these things to be ours. At one level we want to be in charge. But what if we simultaneously despise what comes from us – what comes from our everyday, local interactions? Then a function of the leader becomes alchemy: to take our own base metal, to make its source disappear and to re-present

it to us as gold. If we had this kind of social shame, it would be logical for one of our strong cultural values to be the effacement or mythification of origins. Robert Chia, a thinker about management, has suggested this. It is a Western cult value that cultural objects (including academic work) should make invisible how they came to be created. On this point Chia quotes the art theorist Norman Bryson:

Western painting is predicated on the disavowal of deictic reference. ...  
[Paintings in the Western style are] autochthonous, self-created  
parthenogeneses, virgin births ... . (Chia, 1998, p. 360)

If our leaders in fact have the task of alchemy, we will wrap it in silence.

### **3.8 Intensifying reflexivity - Bourdieu and method**

Any exercise in communication is also an exercise in power. In that sense this project is an exercise in power. Its subject is an exploration of silences. What in this project, and the reflections so far reached, remains a significant silence? To pose this reflexive question is part of intensifying involvement and detachment within this work.

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has played a leading part in developing the concept of reflexive sociology. I will present brief points of his firstly on language and secondly on sociological method, and will then use these in the course of responding to the question.

Bourdieu notes that to speak and to be heard in any field of discourse depends partly upon whether the speaker has accumulated sufficient capital (whatever is considered valuable and worthy of respect in that field) and partly upon her skill in censoring – largely unawares her speech to conform to the expectations of that field. Censoring – Bourdieu’s term – highlights the silencing function which is at work. His approach is close to that of Mead’s gesture-response:

... The conditions of reception [of speech] envisaged are part of the conditions of production, and anticipation of the sanctions of the market [field] helps to determine the production of the discourse. This anticipation, which bears no resemblance to conscious calculation, is an aspect of the linguistic *habitus* which, being the product of a prolonged and primordial relation to the laws of a certain market, tends to function

as a practical sense of the acceptability and the probable value of one's own linguistic productions and those of others on different markets. (Bourdieu, 1991a, pp. 76-77)

Turning to method, firstly reflexivity is Bourdieu's means of avoiding the pitfalls of *both* pure objectivity and pure subjectivity as ideals for understanding human action. For him, individuals must be considered objectively, and at the same time as subjects with intentions and understandings of what they are doing which are not meaningless.

Secondly, he rejects 'methodologism' or any split of questions of method from questions of substance. As expressed by his co-author Loïc Wacquant:

The array of methods used must fit the problem at hand and must constantly be reflected upon *in actu*, in the very movement whereby they are deployed to resolve particular questions. ... One cannot dissociate the construction of the object from the instruments of construction of the object and their critique. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 30)

Thirdly, in being reflexive he prefers to eschew what is more inwardly individual (one form of what I mean by the 'inwardly individual' would be the psychoanalytic). Thus, in relation to myself and this research, he would want reflexive consideration given to the facts<sup>24</sup> that, for example, I am an affluent, Western educated, 50 year old man of mixed race, and to the fact that by inter-penetrating processes of selection and self-selection my position as a successful search professional will lead me to believe that what is inwardly individual about people makes a substantial difference to their impact as leaders. This disposition may encourage me in undertaking reflexive research to include personal feelings. Bourdieu regards this interpretation of reflexivity as narcissistic and beside the point. Thus, when asked by Wacquant:

Can we do a Bourdieuan sociology of Bourdieu? ... Why this unwavering reticence to speak about the private person Pierre Bourdieu? (Ibid., p. 202)

Bourdieu replies:

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<sup>24</sup> These 'facts' are not, of course, simple facts, but socially constructed – as for example explored by Dalal on race (2002).

My sociological discourse is separated from my personal experience by my sociological practice ... I, the concrete individual Pierre Bourdieu, [cannot] escape objectivation: I can be objectivised *like anybody else* and, like anybody else, I have the taste and preferences, the likes and dislikes, that correspond roughly to my position in social space. I am socially classified and I know precisely what position I occupy in social classifications. If you understand my work, you can very easily deduce a great many things about me from knowledge of this position and of what I write. I have given you all the tools necessary for that; as for the rest, leave it to me ... . (Ibid., pp. 203-204)

Wacquant says:

Bourdieu's concern for reflexivity ... fastens not upon the private person of the sociologist in her idiosyncratic intimacy but on the concatenation of acts and operations she effectuates as part of her work and on the collective unconscious inscribed in them. Far from encouraging narcissism and solipsism, epistemic reflexivity invites intellectuals to recognise and to work to neutralize the specific determinisms to which their inmost thoughts are subjected. (Ibid., p. 46)

What then of my reflections now? What silences do I notice now within this act of power itself?

Firstly, I have been deeply struck by the unity of the challenge of this research (method) with the challenge of interviewing a candidate for a job (my substantive inquiry). Both in this research, and when someone is being interviewed, we are seeking to explore a range of experience which to a very large extent is only accessible by the individual recalling that experience, making assertions about it and reliving it in narration. For me this is a new observation, and striking.

Secondly, this project has been silent about my feelings about the journey undertaken. Those feelings include strong excitement and fear, particularly at the uncontrolled sprawling width of the issues which have opened up (and about which the School's Research Degrees Board expressed caution when considering my research proposal).

Thirdly, this project is also silent in a profound way about gender. I take gender to be a powerful shaper of experience and meaning<sup>25</sup>: especially so on a subject such as power. At this point in my research it happens that I, all the members of my learning set, and both of my research supervisors, are men, as are with only one exception (Arendt) the authors whom I cite in this project. (The way in which learning sets were formed was described in Project One.)

Finally, I experience forces of self-censorship as a newcomer attempting to speak into the academic field. I perceive this field as likely to be suspicious of feelings. Moreover it is in love with the detached written word in the sense powerfully expressed by the sociologist Michel de Certeau, commenting more widely about Western rationality:

... One can read above the portals of modernity such inscription as 'Here, to work is to write' or 'Here only what is written is understood'.  
(de Certeau, 1984, p. 134)

But I cannot overcome reflexively this silencing, this social self-censorship if I simply surrender to my perceptions of academic expectations. I vigorously contend that *contra* Bourdieu, in order to be as real as may be, reflexive sociology cannot limit itself to sanitised words from a fictitious impersonal occupant of my social class and professional track. To be so limited is to resurrect the ghost of the detached scientific observer, albeit clothed in some social habits and outlooks.

When I reflected on the exploration in this project of different concepts of power and whether my 'naming' of different 'parts' of power was a flight from (or avoidance of) something, I did sense a fear of a vast and possibly dangerous unknown. That feeling happened through the coming to mind of a famous war poem<sup>26</sup>. A few days

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<sup>25</sup> Some thinkers on gender will be cited in Project Four (section 7.1) but here my intention is simply a naïve statement of my understanding.

<sup>26</sup> 'Naming of Parts', a World War II poem by Henry Reed. Its first verse is:

Today we have naming of parts. Yesterday  
We had daily cleaning. And tomorrow morning,  
We shall have what to do after firing. But today,  
Today we have naming of parts. Japonica  
Glistens like coral in all of the neighbouring gardens,  
And today we have naming of parts.

later I saw an image taken by the prize-winning Italian photographer Luciano Bonacini which struck me as relevant to the points about gender and logophilia which I have just made. I have presented the point in words, but that is not at all the same thing as to utter, and to receive, an image within the field of academic practice. To duck the point would not be to take reflexivity seriously.



### **3.9 Narrative 2: research as a responsive process of local interaction**

Essential to our research method is sending our supervisor and other members of our learning set successive versions of our projects. When I send the preceding version of this project which, for practical purposes, ends with a slightly longer version of section 3.8, I am a bit nervous. I am self-consciously doing something unusual; but that appeals to me. Indeed, is that the worry – am I just clowning, being childish to gain attention?

Subjectively, I know I am not. I realise that point even more strongly when (after seeing a reference to it in the project of another learning set member) I read Foucault on *parrhesia* – a state of mind noticed and commented on in classical Greece in which a speaker:

... less powerful than the one with whom he speaks ... (Foucault, 2001, p. 18)

- certainly I feel that way about my supervisor and the wider academic community - incurs a risk or danger in order to:

... [say] everything he has in mind: he does not hide anything, but opens his heart and mind completely to other people through his discourse. ... In *parrhesia*, telling the truth is regarded as a duty. (Ibid., pp. 12 and 19)

That expresses very well my motive in speaking, with my duty being reflexivity as I currently understand it.

There are several comments on my project, mainly from my supervisor. I will only note a few. My work is moving, taking quite large steps, but may be becoming too inaccessible to someone not already 'in the conversation'. He points to Poe's maelström, to which I referred in Project One (section 2.10)<sup>27</sup>. He suggests that involvement and detachment is an emergent theme within this project (previously I had not seen it as such, and there was no reference to it in the title). He says that poetry can be dangerous in doctoral dissertations; if it is to be included at all, then perhaps in a footnote. He does not comment on the Bonacini photograph. Separately, he wonders if at times I am mentally addressing a commercial rather than an academic reader.

I don't find the discussion difficult. I remove a second photograph (on power) from the project which he found too 'journalistic'. I am inexpert at addressing an academic reader, but it is to such that the remaining photograph is addressed, for the reasons expressed by de Certeau (an academic, so safe?).

Mainly I resonate with the suggestion of involvement and detachment as a substantial theme. I start to notice other things. My reflexivity in section 3.8 was

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<sup>27</sup> A story of two men whose boat is caught in a whirlpool. Both are intensely involved, indeed threatened with drowning, but one manages sufficient detachment to notice differences between the ways large and small pieces of wood are drawn into the vortex, which enable him to save his life.

intense and honest, indeed *parrhesiastic*, but – to use the word I used in section 3.4 – atomic. I could be on a desert island, trying to critique my thoughts alone; or alone with books such as Bourdieu's. I become aware that although I was working hard to be self-critical, even the criticisms were self-focussed. I start to realise that it is possible to be intensively reflexive yet remain caught purely around the pole of my subjectivity. Intensifying my subjectivity through reflexive steps is relevant to what I am trying to do, but I am now aware that, on its own, it may not give me the intensified detachment which I also want.

I'm not on a desert island, I'm in a learning set – and I'm in one because this programme sees research itself as processes of local interaction.

My supervisor has said something which makes me worry that I won't be able to do in Project Three something to which I am powerfully attracted, yet I'm convinced that what I want to do falls within the method of the programme (or ought to). There is potential conflict, loss, fear. So I rush off to read the book in which my professors have – through the work of researchers before me – expounded their understanding of method (Stacey & Griffin, 2005).

Stacey and Griffin take identity, society and indeed thought to be emergent from complex responsive processes of interaction between relatively small numbers of human beings. Making an analogy with complex adaptive systems, by 'complex' they mean:

... a particular dynamic or movement in time that is paradoxically stable and unstable, predictable and unpredictable, known and unknown, certain and uncertain, all at the same time. (Ibid., p. 7)

From within the self-organizing local interactions of agents in complex processes such as Mead's gesture-response there emerge for periods of time widespread patterns, without any overall program or design for those patterns themselves. There is a flat ontology in which there are not understood to be systems or structures as separate orders of existence, though these terms can meaningfully refer to things within the thinking of individuals. On this view, and following Mead (1934) the thinking of individuals is the socially shaped patterning of bodily activity, of gestures



and responses made by the agent to others and to herself, a capacity (self-consciousness) which emerged through increasing complexity in evolution.

As Stacey and Griffin go on to say:

If one takes the view that knowledge emerges and evolves in a *history* of social interaction, rather than being developed by an autonomous individual, then one attaches central importance to research as a participative, social process. Research on organizations is then done by participating in a community of researchers who are together exploring the meaning they are making of their experience. This inevitably involves conflict as people explore their differences and, indeed, this conflict is essential for the movement of thought. (Ibid, p. 10)

One of the book's contributors, Bjørner Christensen, a consultant in Norway, expresses the perspective graphically:

The activities of research and consultation are themselves complex responsive processes of relating. They are, in principle, the same human processes as when I buy a shirt in a shop, drive my car in the traffic, negotiate with my bookkeeper, or have an argument with my teenage daughter. (Ibid, p. 99)

I read the book. It has seven chapters, of which five (like Christensen's) contain 'live' research with narratives of detailed, local interactions. I notice that none of these happen to be interactions within learning sets or within the process of supervision, which may be a matter of accident, editorial selection or that none such have so far been produced in the programme in which I am participating. This is a new point for me.

But, clearly, these 'research' interactions are not different in kind from the other local interactions reflected upon by researchers in the programme. That they are key to the movement of thought in research is exactly what I am experiencing.

Of course, it is not possible to know what would have happened if in section 3.8 I had decided to be more cowardly than *parrhesiastic*. It felt subjectively important, a matter of duty, to be true to my own reflections. That gesture elicited responses. A more mundane gesture might have elicited more mundane responses. Those

responses, and the patterns of anxiety, excitement (or boredom) and other feelings of which they are a part, the shifts in power and potentialities for conflict, and the self-conscious reflection in a group setting, are what has produced several substantial movements of my thought in this project: the close linkage but also sharp difference between this reflexivity and Bourdieu's is sharply drawn.

### **3.10 Power and silence**

For reference I summarise below the connections between power and silence noticed so far in this inquiry. In all these cases, the nature of the connection means that breaking the silence is difficult, threatening or logically impossible – these strands of connection are difficult to 'cut'. Nor is the list exhaustive. Power and silence are bound together in a thick web.

This puts into a context why in my helping to choose over 1,000 individuals for roles concerned with power, its many aspects were so undiscussed. It also suggests how problematic it might be to apply at senior levels some parts of recruitment 'good practice'. Professionally recognised practice for recruitment into front-line, middle-management or technical roles (in which the exercise of power is less central) typically relies on making explicit from the beginning the important features of the role and the skills thought to be of high priority for its successful performance. But what if what is most at stake cannot be made explicit?

In section 2.7 in Project One I pointed to three patterns of silence.

- (a) *Insidious power*. Lukes suggested that 'the most effective and insidious use of power' may be manifested by the absence rather than the presence of conflict or overt action (Lukes, 1974, p. 23).
- (b) *Shame*. Argyris pointed to deeply ingrained defensive habits within organisations which aim to avoid shame or embarrassment. To succeed, these make both the potentially embarrassing matter and the defence of covering it up 'undiscussable' (Argyris, 1990, pp. xi-xii). The discussion in section 3.7 about alchemy and wishing to make obscure to ourselves how things come to be is also relevant<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> One could add here the observation made by Galbraith: '... that power is thus wanted for its own sake cannot, as a matter of basic decency, be too flagrantly conceded.' (1986, pp. 216-217)

- (c) *Pretended objectivity*. I made connections in Project One to our tendency in explaining actions to produce post-rationalized formal discourses which silence that which was intuitive, exploratory or contingent (Bourdieu, 2004, pp. 22-25). I have expanded this in section 3.8 into Bourdieu's thinking in relation to the self-censorship which he sees as an intrinsic part of speaking and being heard within any particular field.

This project has added some further connections between power and silence.

- (d) *Lip-reading*. This was explored in Narrative 1. If one dimension of power is the anticipation of unexpressed wishes, by definition those wishes are not (in the sequence of events under direct examination) expressed.
- (e) *Interpreting silence*. I noted on page 50 that for Foucault, relations of power are inseparable from the shaping of discourses about what is true, and patterns of silence are pivotal in considering this. The step in the analysis of power which Lukes characterises as the move from one dimension to two, ie noticing for analysis non-decisions as well as decisions (discussed on page 47), is a kindred one.
- (f) *Inversion*. I dealt with this theme in section 3.7, referring to Arendt and Elias and exploring leadership as a situation in which there may be relations of power concealed (or made silent) by apparent relations of power in the opposite direction.

## **Chapter Four: Project Three - Intuition and Interviewing: A first inquiry into practical knowing**

### **4.1 Introduction**

My central professional activity for almost twenty years has been interviewing people about their working lives and advising clients on their own interview processes. By interviewing I mean conversations led by one or more interviewers, with one interviewee, which explore the latter's experiences or personal qualities.

In the UK interviewing dominates senior selection processes. In a review for the UK government in 2005 on 'the most reliable, validated techniques for recruiting and selecting senior staff in the private, public and voluntary sectors' Clive Fletcher, a psychologist and leading UK scholar of selection, noted that '... 85% of external [non-Civil Service] organisations still use just interviews and references for top posts.' (Fletcher, 2005, pp. 5, 8)

I am launching a specialist career advice business and product. At the centre of my product is a three hour interview. The emergent process of choosing this direction for myself – and creating a product which can move me in that direction – represents an important transition in my professional life. My livelihood, professional reputation and job satisfaction for the next ten years are at stake.

As I describe my interviewing practice in this embryonic business, what stands out is its intuitive genesis. My central question in this project will be, when we focus on intuition and on interviewing, with what kinds of knowing are we concerned?

### **4.2 Changing career direction**

#### **4.2.1 A three hour interview**

Keith, previously a research physicist in industry, is now a professor of strategy at a major UK business school. Because he is considering a further significant career change he has become a client of mine. In two days we will have a three hour

interview. I download the preparatory work which Keith has done on the internet. It runs to 12 pages and (so the software tells me) took him 3.5 hours. In it I have Keith's thoughts about his career situation and goals for the next 5 years, his interests, his skills, his values and his preferred styles of operating; his hobbies, his heroes and in general terms his financial constraints.

My first reading electrifies me. Keith, now in his mid-40s, is considering whether to take up farming. If my new business about career advice for people wanting to explore lateral options is about anything, it is about this. My own closest contact with farming was one search several years ago for the head of an agricultural college.

A year ago, just before my fiftieth birthday, I left my search firm. I had a financial window of opportunity to take a new direction. Gradually, this crystallised as a specialisation within career advice. My choice of general field was unsurprising: at an early stage in my search career I had seized responsibility at director level for people development, and subsequently declined to give it up. Through reflection on my own motivations, and consideration of which features of my search experience were objectively unusual, this took further shape as a one man business focussed on a niche not previously defined: individuals already successful in one (or more) career(s) wishing to explore seriously making lateral or creative moves.

One day during this exploratory period, without any prior experimentation, several features of my product came together suddenly in my mind. Thus, although I would discuss with clients their needs for on-going coaching or support, I would not (according to my intuition) offer coaching myself. Because I would need to market predominantly to individuals, not corporations, I would keep the price as low as possible by minimising follow-up paperwork. Then, the centrepiece of my product would be an intense three hour conversation. And finally (according to this intuition), although it would reduce my field of clients and cost me time in screening, I needed to weed out of the process individuals who were only curious, rather than hungry, to explore lateral possibilities.

I had never before done a three hour interview: a handful out of several thousand interviews had approached two hours. It was one of these conversations which I was about to have with Keith.

Proper preparation on Keith's internet material distilled itself into a page and a half of further questions and three or four 'trial balloon' thoughts about possible future career paths. 'Proper'? Keith was my fourth trial client in an otherwise untested process: how did I know in what 'proper preparation' should consist? Yet, intuitively I thought I did: I absorbed his material as deeply as possible so as to identify more *questions*, and fought my craving to go into meetings with clients already knowing *answers*.

This 'proper' preparation scared me. I knew that by the last half-hour of the three hours, 'something' (whether called answers or not) needed to emerge between us, or I would look a fool and a charlatan.

Opening the conversation with Keith, I suggested that our discussion would have broadly three movements: questions drawing me more deeply into what he had written, or inquiring after possible omissions or contradictions; jointly brainstorming possible futures, in which we put ourselves imaginatively into each future in turn and reflected together on what it might be like to live out; and finally, a drawing out and choosing of priorities and possible next steps.

The first phase continued for more than an hour. I started with a rain of factual inquiries about his family, his existing house and his animals. I asked him to tell me much more specifically what it would mean to 'develop more with [his] boys and wife as they develop' and 'to have a house in [a certain part of the country] which feels like home'. From his internet material the central importance to Keith of these goals (and of involvement with animals) was clear: I felt a strong need to visualise all this more concretely.

The next questions sniffed around every possible small clue, which might or might not turn out to be material. For this plenty of time is essential, otherwise things are

overlooked; three hours turns out to provide something like an ample urgency. I pick up on a brief written reference to music and poetry: it turns out that Keith has privately written poetry since he was sixteen and has never stopped. Asking about a particular research project unexpectedly leads Keith to provide strong evidence of selling skills, which elsewhere he has vigorously denied having.

Roving by continuous reflection and intuition between his internet material, his cv as interpreted by my search experience and the now rapidly accumulating body of oral evidence, new questions come to my mind thick and fast. Some test for different kinds of pattern. Is there a pattern of creeping boredom which overtakes both of his first two careers, in physics and then in business research, and which might overtake even farming?

Other questions seek to decompose farming into its interacting elements. We separate out different aspects – land/the outdoors, animals, a greater tactile/physical aspect in his work. Each of these turns out to be important to Keith in different ways. What about the financial side? What would having a farm would mean for his wife and children, and what have they said about that?

To keep the grilling energising for him it matters that I do not lose my thread, while constantly adjusting my approach to his flow. To keep his confidence I need to be visibly on top of the large amount of emotionally nuanced information which pours out. To keep his trust I need to embody a deep sense of interest in his life and happiness. In less intense and complex form this interviewing stance evolved through my practice in executive search; now I can deploy these skills solely in Keith's interest, rather than that of organisations which might hire him.

As I go, I am watching the time and adding to my list of possible options which we will seek to bring to imaginative life in brainstorming. As we explore those possibilities (even apparently ludicrous ones), I am watching for different patterns in his whole expression in the way he picks them up and discards them or not. I draw some of those patterns to his attention.

More than two hours in, I judge that we should make the final conversational turn towards priorities, choices and practicalities. There is a moment of truth for me here: I own up that try as I might, I cannot come up with a full-blown farming option which is even viable-in-fantasy. We have both tried, and so far I cannot see it. Have I failed?

I act out of a belief that imagined, creative, warm possibilities and cold realities, commitments and limited time and resources are (properly handled) not annihilating opposites, but complements. But that feels like faith, not intuitive conviction.

I experience the conversation as ending on a mutual high. Keith says, 'This is a really important conversation. It's something to have someone like you spend this amount of time thinking about my life.' The meaning of the conversation for Keith will arise, and arise again and change, as weeks go by and further conversations take place with himself and others. Within a couple of days I take two or three hours to compose a five page follow-up letter drawing out some of the themes and points which strike me as particularly significant. One of my product intuitions was wrong: people would rather have the letter and pay for it.

In a subsequent conversation with Keith I reflect on the emergence by intuition of these three hour conversations. I say, 'It's like I'm teaching myself to do something which I've never done before. What on earth can that mean?'

Keith is perplexed and alert. 'That's a strange way to put it. Why don't you just say you discipline yourself to do certain things?'

I try that formula on for size. 'Because that's not quite it,' I conclude. 'I can discipline myself to do something which I think is right without having the subjective feeling of knowing that it *is* right. But 'teaching' means that part of me feels it *knows from experience* that it is right. Yet I have never done it before.'



#### **4.2.2 The theme of intuition**

Central to this narrative is *intuition*. According to the narrative, intuition suggests itself as a feeling linked to a way of knowing: a feeling of capacity of action into the unknown (I *know* what to do) which may be mistaken but is not racked by doubt, and a way of knowing distinct from knowing by rational calculation.

In the narrative intuition appears in two forms: micro-patterning in the course of conversations and a large, singular leap - the creation as if *ex nihilo* of the three hour interviews. The common thread seems to be a subjective 'feeling of knowing': but the two kinds of intuition might prove to be very different things.

Creation *ex nihilo* is implausible. My business may fail, and the idea of three hour conversations may prove to be flawed: but however flawed, there was skilled creation of a highly skilled action. I did not draw 'three hours' out of a hat, but out of experience.

#### **4.2.3 The theme of interviewing**

Out of what experience? In particular the experience of *interviewing*. This point needs to be substantiated. Although only a handful of interviews out of more than 7,500 conducted by me had even approached two hours, might not the intuition's genesis lie in my experience of other kinds of meetings?

As chair of a national charity, for approaching two years I have chaired board meetings which normally last 3.5 hours and involve about 15 people. And as a search professional, on many occasions I led colleagues in presenting to client committees the results of sifting or interviewing work which required covering thirty or more candidates. Many of these meetings took 3 or 4 hours. But all are very distant from what I was doing with Keith. I prepared in intense detail and the conversations were planned in advance in smaller segments, indicated by an agenda or list of names: spontaneous segments of conversation might only last 5 or 10 minutes (or 40 minutes for an extended board discussion). In my professional life continuous threads of

discussion of an hour or more centred around one person's life occurred in interviews.

We (including those of us whose specialism it is) habitually think of interviewing as a confined subject concerned with a limited palette of questioning techniques.

'Generally prefer open rather than closed questions' is a commonplace example. The title of this project implies that I am coming to think of interviewing more broadly in the context of different ways of knowing; but at this stage I am meaning the word quite conventionally.

### **4.3 Thinking about intuition – interactionist perspectives**

I begin this inquiry with an account of the stance towards intuition embodied in my interviewing practice over twenty years, including in professional norms which I partly assimilated and partly rejected (section 4.3.1). Then I begin taking up current literature on intuition and management (section 4.3.2). Intuition as described in this literature connects well with both the smaller jumps and the large leap which I have narrated, but the gains in understanding made remain limited.

More light is shed if we stop positing intuition as an affective or cognitive phenomenon isolated from other ways of knowing. I compare the model of expertise which is dominant in recruitment – competencies (originally developed by Boyatzis) – with the understanding offered by Dreyfus (sections 4.3.3 and 4.3.4). This changes my understanding of my narrative and of intuition significantly. I then make a further exploration of my narrative themes with the insights offered by Weick's treatment of improvisation (section 4.3.5), which I compare with Dreyfus and critique. By now a movement of thought is under way which will go beyond the boundaries of this project.

#### **4.3.1 Intuition within recruitment**

I first worked full-time as an interviewer for one year around 1988, on secondment from H M Treasury to the Civil Service's assessment centre for fast-stream recruitment (CSSB). I soaked up as an enthusiastic novice a professional ethos of recruitment.

That ethos valued scientific detachment. CSSB perhaps exceeded any other assessment centre in the UK in terms of length of scientifically examined track record. Candidates were assessed in groups of four or five over two days by teams of three, comprising a ‘Chairman’ (a retired senior civil servant), a ‘Psychologist’ and an ‘Observer’ (a younger civil servant such as myself). Each of us had structured 40 minute interviews with each candidate. The scientific stance was shown in the emphasis (given to assessors and candidates alike) that the assessment required was against an objective standard which all the candidates in one group, or none of them, might reach; quite unlike the competitive context of interviewing later in my career. Even the quaint terminology ‘Observer’ was inaccurate but telling.

Assessors were trained that intuition was not useful: it was dangerous. Many studies had shown grotesque results from letting unstructured, subjective intuition loose in personnel decisions. For example, Richard Boyatzis whose work on competencies I shall come to in section 4.3.3 noted that:

... the [Broadway Manufacturing Company] designed a study in which people who had entered the company as supervisory managers 20 years earlier would be examined ... They found that the people who were promoted the most within the company were different than their less effective counterparts on only one dimension: they were taller. (Boyatzis, 1982, p. 4)

There is much else in this genre, which moves quickly into wider questions such as racism and sexism. To treat this literature fully would be an inquiry (or several) of its own. Sufficient here to note firstly, that these effects are widespread and well-documented<sup>29</sup> and, secondly, that training in such matters had a profound impact on myself. Many professional experiences later confirmed that the training was on the mark.

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<sup>29</sup> For example, studies among managers in utility companies have suggested that physical attractiveness is correlated with interview ratings as well as with assessed job performance (Motowidlo & Burnett, 1995) (Burnett & Motowidlo, 1998) (DeGroot & Motowidlo, 1999). Women facing male interviewers should wear dark jackets (and preferably blue rather than red), while female interviewers are relatively uninfluenced by colour (Damhorst & Reed, 1986) (Scherbaum & Shepherd, 1987). Or, it is estimated that the time taken by untrained interviewers to reach an intuitive decision for which they may use the rest of the interview to provide corroboration has been estimated at 9 minutes (Tucker & Rowe, 1977) or 4 minutes (Springbett, 1958).

The one-on-one interviews which I moved on to do as a search professional were typically between 1 hour and 1 hour 15 minutes. Normally I was armed with a cv (possibly out of date). This stage would typically involve my firm in having attracted the interest of 12-15 candidates, with 3-5 being recommended after interview by us to meet the client with a view to a single person being appointed. Few other selection tools available to me: perhaps a formal or informal telephone reference, or (if the candidate had been interviewed by us for a job previously) the assessment prepared by us against that (differing) specification. If we failed to fill the appointment to the client's satisfaction we would need to do the whole project again for no additional fee.

This commercial work was much more exposed than sitting as part of a team, working in a government institution shielded from such realities as candidate supply and demand. Financially, in a good year my total remuneration could double that in a bad year. It was scary to get to the final three out of twelve one-on-one interviews for a critical role, having yet to meet anyone both well-qualified for the role and persuadable to take it.

Most search professionals do form intuitive judgements which they have difficulty explaining. This is criticised and runs legal risks. For example an exposition of good current recruitment practice by a psychologist and an HR consultant (Wood & Payne, 1998) observes that:

If [a biographical interview is not driven by clear criteria], this can quickly become an unstructured interview. ... This is the kind of interview often favoured by headhunters who reckon they know how to find 'the right kind of chap' ... . (Ibid., p. 97)

As those authors also observe:

Many studies have shown the predictive validity of unstructured interviews to be around zero. (Ibid., p. 96)

The current ‘best practice’ model, not only for recruitment but for the systematic management of human resources in organisations, is to analyse both the positions to be filled and the capacities offered by candidates in terms of competencies. Because of the dominance of this model in contemporary human resource practice, I provide a close examination of it in section 4.3.3. Here I simply note, what kind of interview is partnered with competencies as ‘best practice’?

Craig Russell (1990) describes how a Fortune 50 company selected internal candidates for promotion to its top general management tier – ie a situation without any of the issues of persuasion or selling faced in executive search. The candidates’ average age was 47.5, with 22 years’ previous service with the company. They underwent recorded interviews which lasted between 4 and 8.5 hours (average 4.5) concentrating on their main challenges, achievements and learnings in their previous work history and in their current role. Transcripts were prepared and assessments made independently by 5 raters against each of 9 specially-identified top management competencies. This was combined with assessments by direct superiors and a range of other colleagues. At the time of writing up this work, Russell noted that insufficient time had elapsed to make a judgement about its success.

Such techniques offer remarkable granularity of data of particular kinds at various costs. One cost is the time required which, if good candidates are hard to attract, can be sufficient to kill off busy individuals’ potential interest in the role. But even in situations (such as Russell’s) in which credible candidates are willing, or when as is common the full-blown concept of competencies is drastically simplified (Wood & Payne, 1998, pp. 21, 26, 27), competency-based interviews set out to ignore biographical narratives in favour of ones of episodic behaviour. This a serious lacuna: to treat a person as a collection of skills is not only to remain detached from her as a person, but to remain in the dark as to which skills she will be motivated to use in the role for which she is being considered.

Intuition and structure need not be antithetical, but in examples such as the one given, they are. Such interview processes are attempts to create objective knowledge

about a person based on the detachment and implicit interchangeability of observers. It has no place for intuition.

What part did intuition play in my own practice? By conventional standards my 60-75 minute conversations were semi-structured. I opened by explaining the three stages of the interview. These were: what steps would follow if the client and the candidate both so desired (usually four or five minutes); then a request to the candidate to identify three or four questions about the vacant role of importance to her, to which I would respond so far as I was able (this might take between ten and thirty minutes); followed by an edited biographical interview.

In this latter stage I aimed for a relaxed narrative flow from the candidate (with myself as attentive listener and note-taker) while making various interventions to weave a cloth incorporating several strands: the changing pattern of the candidate's career motivation, noting promotions or their absence and stated reasons for changes of employer; greater specificity about responsibilities and claimed achievements in previous jobs; and brief accounts of the relevant career achievements of which the candidate was most proud.

Intuition played a growing part as skills were developed by intensive repetition. I have 32 pages of stream-of-consciousness notes which I dictated for training purposes in 2000. On the first page I addressed novice interviewers in my firm thus:

... the best way to learn how to interview in a company like this is to sit in on a range of people interviewing and to see what they do and to push them on what they're doing and why they're doing it .... anyone who watches some of the most experienced people in the firm interview, will watch a huge amount of intuitive activity going on in the interview. This can be highly misleading. Although everyone who is selected to work as a consultant needs a certain level of intuitive capability, actually what you're observing as intuition is all their accumulated wisdom and factual knowledge about everything. By doing this stuff for 5 years or 10 years and getting to the point where you know an awful lot about an awful lot of organisations then interviewing magic starts to happen. There is no short-cut to that, but the start is that stock of knowledge built up over time. (Board, 2000, p. 1)

However I was also scathing about any suggestion that ‘you know in the first two minutes of the interview that someone’s any good or not’ (ibid., p. 4). So in relation to intuition two strongly contrary features emerged from the collision of ‘good practice’ models and training with my own increasing experience: agreement with those models in challenging strongly intuition as ‘first impressions’, but a strong assertion in the face of those models that intuition somehow bound up with 5 or 10 years of repeated, skilled performance was at the heart of my role.

The narrative shows that in moving on from practice as a search professional, the work which I have currently chosen intensifies both of these contrary aspects. Moving yet further away from first impressions, I offer a product in which my client and I will spend between us seven or eight hours enhancing our understandings about what makes my client ‘tick’ before we have our principal meeting; while on the foundation of such developed preparations, the three hour interview itself both enables and forces an intense level of intuition in the way we work together. However this discussion of how I encountered intuition within recruitment does not shed any light on the *ex nihilo* leap to the idea of the three hour interview itself.

#### **4.3.2 Current thinking on intuition**

Intuition is increasingly noted and studied as a feature of contemporary studies of organisational life. Eugene Sadler-Smith (2008) notes that in a 1999 study of senior managers in US businesses, 59% stated that they used intuition often or very often in making decisions; 89% stated that they did so at least sometimes. Quoting a global study of more than 1,000 managers (Parikh, Neubauer, & Lank, 1994), Sadler-Smith observed that:

... The three most popular accounts [of intuition] were: a perception of decision without recourse to logical or rational methods; an inexplicable comprehension that arrives as a feeling ‘from within’; and an integration of accumulated knowledge and previous expertise. (Sadler-Smith, 2008, p. 499)

For him:

Intuitions are rapid, affectively charged judgments arrived at without conscious awareness of the reasoning processes involved. ... Intuitive judgments based on nonconscious pattern recognition ... and somatic (bodily) state activation/awareness (commonly known as ‘gut feeling’ ...) are acknowledged as significant in human decision-making processes. (Ibid., p. 494)

In their wide-ranging study of the role of intuition in managerial decision-making, Erik Dane and Michael Pratt (2007) examine 17 definitions of intuition from Jung onwards. They conclude:

... We conceptualize intuition both by its process (which we refer to as *intuiting*), as well as its outcome (which we term *intuitive judgments*) .... our review of the various literature on intuition has tended to converge on four characteristics that make up the core of the construct: intuition is a (1) non-conscious process (2) involving holistic associations (3) that are produced rapidly, which (4) result in affectively charged judgments. (Ibid., p. 36)

The intuition variously described by these and other authors is recognisable to me as, or as closely connected to, the experience into which I am inquiring. Among such authors there is a strong consensus that intuition involves feelings; but is it a knowledgeable process? Dane and Pratt (ibid., pp. 40-41) note that while one substantial body of research suggests that intuitive judgements are inferior to rational decision-making – and this is the view taken and evidenced in the recruitment literature – there is an important distinction between expert and non-expert intuition. Intuitive thinking of the latter kind is seen to involve heuristic processes, cognitive approximations and short-cuts, applied in a generic way even in fields about which the subject is ignorant; while the intuition of experts rests on different, highly domain-specific, ‘expert schemas’:

While the heuristic-based view of intuition has dominated research on intuition and problem solving, a growing body of research suggests that ‘experts’ can make highly accurate intuitive decisions. ... We argue that the main differences between these bodies of research lies in the nature of the schemas of experts, which are (1) highly complex and (2) domain relevant. ... [A 1973] study revealed that chess masters are able to recognize at least 50,000 different configurations of chess pieces on sight ... (Ibid., p. 42)



This distinction between intuition as expertise (good) and intuition as amateur heuristics (dangerous) explains well the strong distinction within my practice to which I pointed at the end of section 4.3.1. Why had this distinction not already been taken up in recruitment interviewing, an activity whose outcomes are acknowledged to matter to individuals, organisations and wider society, and afflicted by the widely known problems in first-impressions interviewing? The following can only be suggestions.

Firstly, the mantle of expertise in selection interviewing has been claimed by psychologists using predominantly behaviouristic tools. The scientific nature of these tools seems to have had an intellectually hegemonistic effect. I am not aware either from practice or from searching specialist selection literature of a vibrant ecology of contesting intellectual or practice-based perspectives, such as exists around the activity of leadership. The activity of interviewing feels like an island only connected at occasional low tides to the organisational mainland. The point that such isolation could have non-trivial consequences was experienced and articulated by Russell as part of his preparations for the top-level selection exercise described on page 77:

Hunter and Hunter's (1984) comprehensive review of selection tools failed to cite any of the literature in Bass' (1981) comprehensive review of the leadership literature. Theorists and practitioners become even more discouraged on finding that *none* of the scholarly literatures provide tools for the selection of top level corporate leaders, despite considerable current attention to 'successful planning' in the personnel selection literature and 'transformational' skills in the leadership literature. (Russell, 1990, p. 73)

Secondly, candidate interviewing is not a high status activity within either of the relevant professional sub-fields in human resources – neither in client HR departments (where work which can be described as strategic or systemic is prized) nor in search firms (where sales and client handling are prized). Analysing the top-level corporate search market in the US, the management sociologist Rakesh Khurana found search to be a low-status activity with a theatrical, legitimising function for clients who themselves evaluated 'prospective CEOs based not on their individual abilities and achievements but according to a set of essentially extraneous criteria employed in a process of 'social matching'.' (Khurana, 2002, p. 118)

Thirdly, within large, blue-chip organisations the past three decades in HR management have seen the rise of the competency framework for understanding people and their skills. The framework itself and its behaviourist implications I shall examine in the next section; here we may notice the hegemonic effect of any system which many corporations have sought to embed not only in their cultures but in hard-wired integrated human resource systems (which control recruitment through to payroll, training, appraisal, promotion and retirement). Wood & Payne put it like this:

Competencies, then, offer a way of binding together and integrating the elements of a progressive human resources strategy. If competencies are defined, as they should be, with reference to the needs of the business, then a competency-based appraisal system can help to reinforce particular approaches to work (for example, continuous improvement or customer focus). Delivered in this way, competencies can be a powerful tool when trying to change the culture of an organization. The overall effect is to oblige everyone in the organization to focus on their performance in specific, common areas, to develop their skills accordingly and ultimately to improve the performance of the organization. (1998, p. 22)

Hollenbeck notes:

Behavioral competency models – a benchmarking study by the American Productivity and Quality Council in 2004 found that every one of their best practice organizations had developed a behavioural competency model, designed to guide their selection and development efforts. It is difficult to find any organization today that doesn't have its competency model. (2009, p. 132)

Finally, the same three decades have been significant in western societies in terms of raised profile and increased legislation and political action concerned with the alarming impacts of heuristics-based intuition on gender, race or other discrimination. These impacts combined with the form taken by measures mandated by law to redress them (for example standardised interviews in which identical questions, and no other questions or conversation, take place between the interviewers and each interviewee) have intensified the drive towards rules-based, non-subjective and non-intuitive practice. Both the march of law and litigation and

the concealed conflict so engendered ( indicated by the use of the term ‘political correctness’) has strongly opposed the possibility of noticing expert intuition as a professional resource in interviewing.

What of my intuitive leap to the 3 hour structure? As already noted, this seems a leap *beyond* all past experience, not the rapid matching of a pattern within it. So is it part of the same intuitive phenomenon?

A relevant distinction is recognised by Mary Crossan and her colleagues at the Richard Ivey School of Business:

Whereas expert intuition provides insight into the important process of pattern recognition, entrepreneurial intuition has more to do with innovation and change. No two situations are the same, and patterns, while similar, are never identical. The ability to make novel connections and to discern possibilities is also key to intuiting. ... Whereas expert intuition may be past pattern oriented, entrepreneurial innovation is future possibility oriented. ... Entrepreneurial intuiting generates new insights. (Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999, p. 526)

Crossan *et al* go on to note some observations by Koestler on the gestation of new insights from the natural sciences, and some examples of mixed success for intuitive entrepreneurs in business. But while these authors note entrepreneurial intuition, they do not have much to offer in explaining it, or justifying why it is sensible to use the word ‘intuition’ to embrace both things.

The leap in my narrative to creating the three hour interview therefore remains unclear. However we have made some progress on exploring intuition as a micro-activity. We are not discussing free-floating first impressions, but a domain-dependent way of knowing closely linked to the development of skill, which (in words quoted above from Sadler-Smith) involves rapid, affectively charged judgments arrived at without conscious awareness of the reasoning processes involved. We should therefore look more closely at what constitutes skill and its progressive development. I present and critique first the framework for thinking about skill which I have already characterised as currently dominant in the human resource practice of large organisations: competencies.

### 4.3.3 The competency model of practical knowledge (Boyatzis)

Richard Boyatzis based 'The Competent Manager: A Model for Effective Performance' (1982) on studies by McBer and Company involving over 2,000 managers working in 8 Fortune 500 companies in different sectors together with 4 federal US agencies. Stung by the appalling results of cumulative *ad hoc* selection over time, Boyatzis and his colleagues devised an exhaustive procedure for identifying salient differences between more effective and less effective managers.

Boyatzis begins with candidate criteria initially generated and refined in discussion with managers themselves – particularly discussions focussed on striking events (critical incidents) perceived as fundamental to organisational success. These are tested for behavioural measurability and correlations with assessments of effective and ineffective individual performance. From iterations of this work emerge 'competences', which in Boyatzis' formulation have dimensions of motivation, self-image and social-role (interaction with others) as well as demonstrated behaviour. Against these competencies, candidates for appointment can be measured by detailed, structured, behavioural interviews of which Russell's example on page 77 is illustrative.

For the definition of a competency, following Klemp Boyatzis states:

A job competency is an 'underlying characteristic of a person which results in effective and/or superior performance in a job'. A job competency is *an underlying characteristic of a person* in that it may be a motive, trait, skill, aspect of one's self-image or social role, or a body of knowledge which he or she uses. The existence and possession of these characteristics may or may not be known to the person. (Ibid, pp. 20-21)

Based on combining different McBer and Company studies (all of them large organisations in the United States), Boyatzis propounds 21 competencies which correlate with 'effective general management', which he takes to be common to and abstractable from the corporates studied. However ideally, as in Russell's example, competencies should be tailored to effectiveness and ineffectiveness within a single organisation's unique context (though to carry this through rigorously is an expensive task).

The broadest objection to competencies is that having invented these constructs from aggregated human behaviour, its proponents then re-invent people as what they are not, collections of competencies. Peter Vaill has made an extended critique of the competency movement. His central concern is that competencies are reifications or abstractions:

... of a very tricky sort for they involve splitting action from consciousness. Managing of any sort, let alone highly effective managing, is a very personal intertwining of consciousness and action .... the [competency movement's] idea of what is real is an abstraction twice-removed for in its creation of a competency it has aggregated the visible action-capabilities of many actors, smoothing out the differences of energy-level, personal style and cultural attunement which individual actors manifest. (Vaill, 1989, pp. 45-46)

The Boyatzis model becomes more difficult to implement at the most senior levels of organisations. The populations of post-holders become too small to generate reliability, and judging what behaviour is effective versus ineffective necessarily becomes contested and political. Also, an organisation blindly wedded to expensively researched competences may struggle to cope if its future is unlike its researched past. None of these points need impede a self-confident chief executive from driving her organisation through competencies which take for granted her own perspective. But even then the model has weaknesses. I focus on three which are linked – motivation, sociality and specialist knowledge.

Even when competencies are fully implemented with the motivational dimension included, which in my experience is uncommon – Wood & Payne describe the ‘progressive simplification and muddying’ of competencies as ‘a worrying trend’ (1998, p. 21) - the concept of motivation is behavioural. For example:

When people with a high achievement motive encounter a situation in which their performance can be measured and a goal can be stated, their achievement motive is aroused. Once aroused, the motivated thought directs and selects their behaviour. (Boyatzis, 1982, p. 28)

Many organisations would be concerned to appoint leaders whose significant behaviours would be aroused so unreflexively. If we were the creatures which competencies posit, it would be nonsensical for Keith to experience as a valuable

self-clarification hours spent discussing whether he should now make farming part of his life: the smell of manure on Wellington boots would tell all that he (or anyone) could know. But for Charles Taylor and some other philosophers, a central fact of being human is that we have the second-order dilemma of whether we want to want to farm. (Taylor, 1989)

Boyatzis' concept of action is also not social. In a curious and unexplained move he notes local interaction as important but arbitrarily breaks with it to postulate social roles as enduring attributes of persons:

In his framework, Bales has described the roles that a person may take in a particular group. The role is determined by the interactions of the person with others in the group. The social role level of the competencies is a distinction based on the *contention* that individuals will demonstrate a degree of consistency in the roles that they will take in various groups at work and in their lives. (Ibid., pp. 30-31, emphasis added)

Finally, Boyatzis treats specialised knowledge as discrete data 'downloadable' into any effectively thinking and reasoning general manager:

Specialized knowledge is defined as a usable body of facts and concepts. Literally, knowledge refers to the retention of information, whether that information is technical or a method of communication (eg a language). The ability to utilize knowledge effectively is the result of other competencies that involve ways of thinking or reasoning. (Ibid., p. 26)

In effect, competencies leach all the subtle, intuitive skill out of concrete ('specialised') interactions and replant it in abstract general constructs. Contrast, for example, the rendering above of 'specialised knowledge' as 'a usable body of facts and concepts' with the intuitive skill-content implied by the following self-description statements, which align with different generalised competencies: 'I know what I'm doing and will do it well', 'I can verbally communicate well', 'I can make groups work effectively' and 'I can keep an appropriate emotional distance' (ibid., pp. 118, 118, 138 and 180). This is the opposite of linking effective intuition with domain-specific expertise. In the next section we try a different tack.

#### 4.3.4 The Dreyfus model of expertise

Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus, a philosopher and a computer scientist, propose that expertise can only be acquired by progressively more involved encounters with numerous practical situations in which something is at stake (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986). In their view, most commonly individuals progress sequentially through the stages set out in the table on page 89, though both leaps and regression are possible. Their proposal comes from their study of skill acquisition by airplane pilots, chess players, automobile drivers and adult learners of a second language; in a subsequent study by Benner it was found to match well the acquisition of nursing skill. (Ibid., p. 20) (Benner, 2001)

In marked contrast to Boyatzis, Dreyfus & Dreyfus emphasise that expertise is not abstractable and generalised, but intrinsically context-dependent, dependent on extensive situational knowledge not reducible to rules specifiable in advance. Moreover the way in which that situational knowledge is tapped does not resemble linear inspection of a library of cases – it is not ‘information processing’ but closer to ‘holistic similarity recognition’ (ibid., p. 28). Their work brings out two other features. Firstly, involvement and detachment – a theme which has occupied us in Projects One and Two. The significance of involvement is striking: they see no detached route to the higher levels of expertise. Secondly, they distinguish rationality from intuition and develop a structured synthesis of the two. Before taking this up I note that in encountering this model, I experienced a substantial shedding of light not simply on my narrative but also on my professional experience as an interviewer.

I can now make more sense of the trends in my interviewing practice over twenty years. As in a piece of wood there is a grain, a direction, inherent in my professional practice. It runs towards increased involvement and greater spontaneity and reflexivity in real time, and a changing relationship between rules and knowledge derived from encounters with a large multiplicity of individual situations. My narrative shows this in action with Keith.

Moreover, the leap to the 3 hour structure, while still a creative action, no longer comes *ex nihilo*. It is a leap in the direction pointed towards by Dreyfus’ successive levels of expertise, a move within a game towards the game’s most skilful

possibilities. As for the distance leaped – to 3 hours rather than 2, 4 or 5 – these insights prompt me now to notice more precisely what my intuitive conviction was. It was not that 3 hours was some optimum. Rather, it was that I could make 3 hours work; that I was unconfident of making durations much longer than 3 hours work; and that of all the durations about which I felt confident, 3 promised the best results. In one or two years' time I could find that 4 hours has become do-able and proves more productive still.

I experience the Dreyfus model as shedding light not only on the evolution of my professional practice (the subject of my narrative), but also on a significant part of the content of that practice – how to make some assessment through interview of an interviewee's skill level in a domain of which one has no personal knowledge<sup>30</sup>.

However the way in which Dreyfus & Dreyfus separate intuitive thinking from rationality deserves thought. Was the step not already taken in section 4.3.2, that intuition (if only by definition) is not rational? No. Intuition was suggested to be fast, non-conscious and involving feelings. Inability to produce straightforwardly a rational account of one's conclusion is certainly taken by the authors I have cited as a mark of intuition. Yet none of these things irresistibly implies lack of rationality. In the nature of chess, for example, must not successful intuitive expertise – however fast, non-conscious, unaccountable and involving of feelings – be a form of rational thinking?

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<sup>30</sup> In my training notes I posit the example of a search assignment 'to find a brilliant someone to be an outstanding virtuoso, young first violinist for an orchestra'. I assume that none of us know anything about orchestras or violin-playing, but we now have to interview 12 candidates found by telephone research from recommendations from all over the world. I suggest some ways of approaching the interviews and propose that from a variety of sources, including the person's 'body language and ... emotional language' as they discuss various pertinent topics, 'you start to build up some picture of which ones are better and which ones are worst, even in a field in which we know nothing' (Board, 2000, pp. 17-18). How much better the notes would have been had I known of the Dreyfus model then.



## THE DREYFUS MODEL OF EXPERTISE

<i>Skill level</i>	<i>Nature of decision-making</i>	<i>Implied commitment</i>	<i>Brief summary</i> <sup>31</sup>
Novice	Analytical	Detached	The novice follows context-free decision rules
Advanced beginner	Analytical	Detached	The advanced beginner's decision rules embrace some situational as well as context-free elements
Competent	Analytical	Detached understanding and deciding. Involved in outcome	The competent performer assesses situations consciously and, after deliberation, may depart from some rules
Proficient	Analytical	Involved understanding	The proficient performer recognises situations intuitively ('holistic similarity recognition') and chooses actions deliberately
Expert	Intuitive	Involved	For the expert, assessment and action are seamless and intuitive

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<sup>31</sup> The first three columns of this table are extracted from Dreyfus & Dreyfus' own table (ibid., p. 50); the summaries are my distillation from their exposition of the five skill levels (ibid., pp. 16-51).  
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Dreyfus & Dreyfus (one of whom is a tournament chess-player) considered earlier work on chess-masters and challenged it with an experiment in which an international master continued to demonstrate expertise in five-seconds-a-move chess while his conscious thinking capacity was fully absorbed by having to add numbers spoken to him at about one per second (ibid., p. 33). This leads them to disbelieve that expert intuition consists of conscious rationality speeded up by application to a reduced problem - the problem having been reduced by a large, rapid-access library of component situations, each tagged with a 'best move' rationally analysed on a previous occasion. They propose that truly expert intuition is *not* reducible to 'here is some thinking which I did earlier', but engages a new mode of thinking.

That the intuitive expertise of the chess-master produces rational results Dreyfus & Dreyfus do not dispute: what they differentiate it from is conscious, linear, analysis of wholes into parts:

The word rational, deriving from the Latin word *ratio*, meaning to reckon or calculate, has come to be equivalent to calculative thought and so carries with it the connotation of 'combining component parts to obtain a whole'; arational behaviour, then, refers to action without conscious analytic decomposition and recombination. *Competent performance is rational; proficiency is transitional; experts act arationally.* (Ibid., p. 36)

While experts may act in an unreflective flow, when time permits and circumstances warrant, they do (Dreyfus & Dreyfus suggest) take time for reflective deliberation – but this thinking will be arational, not analytic:

While most expert performance is ongoing and nonreflective, when time permits and outcomes are crucial, an expert will deliberate before acting. (Ibid, pp. 31-32)

... Detached deliberative rationality ... can enhance the performance of even the intuitive expert. ... Such deliberation tests and improves whole intuitions. ... It is not the sort of calculative rationality used by the beginner or competent performer as a surrogate for intuitive thinking ... . (Ibid., p. 40).

Comparing Dreyfus & Dreyfus' suggestion with the narrative and my experience of interviewing candidates as a search professional, where I see substantial coherence is in the idea of a partnership between analytical and other modes of thinking: a partnership with a variety of possible configurations, in which the configuration used itself arises intuitively:

[The deliberative expert] is thinking about *the process and product of his intuitive understanding*. There may even be experts at thinking about their intuitive thinking, who would then have intuitions about the validity of their intuitions. (Ibid., p. 167)

Thus in my narrative the intuition to create the three hour conversation is accompanied by the intuition to precede it with internet-based software and candidate preparation. In interviewing candidates as a search professional, how much predominantly analytical thinking was required to make judgements after the interviews were concluded varied. But, reflecting on my own experience, I would disagree with Dreyfus' suggestion that at a high level of expertise one sees the onset of some fundamentally different way of thinking. Rather I would interpret intuitive and analytical thinking as in general present at all levels of skill, with the levels in the table on page 89 serving as good descriptions of predominant but not exclusive patterns (no novice completely follows context-free decision rules, as anyone who has taught novices will realise).

#### **4.3.5 An alternative model of intuitive skill – improvisation (Weick)**

We have advanced some way in understanding the narrative. The three hours interview now seems much less of a surprise to me. My example of entrepreneurial intuition may turn out to be more closely related than section 4.3.2 suggested to expert intuition; and intuition itself may (I suggested at the end of the immediately preceding section) be inseparably linked to analytic thinking.

The model of expertise which has proved most productive in this respect has been that of Dreyfus & Dreyfus, which I noted stood in marked contrast to the model of expertise (competencies) dominant in my professional field. But we have already noticed that field stands as something of an island untouched by the larger currents in

organisational thinking. It would therefore be valuable to contrast the Dreyfus model with something also offering a five-level progression in intuitive skill, coming from the contribution of the organisational scholar Karl Weick to the discourse on improvisation. Weick is most noted for his development of the perspective of sense-making, which contends that a broad range of organisational activity including apparently forward-looking acts such as the making of plans and choices may often be better understood as backward-looking acts in which we construct and reconstruct our experiences of past and present in order to make some sense of them (Weick, 1995). We shall return to this in the Synopsis (section 6.6). But my present focus is on his contribution ‘Improvisation as a Mindset for Organizational Analysis’ (Weick, 2001, pp. 284-304).

Just as in the Dreyfus model increasingly skilled domain-specific practice is seen as emerging in stages which can be identified by comparison with following a rule, so improvisation – and Weick takes jazz as his source domain – is concerned with the skill involved in music-making which starts by, but goes beyond, following a given melody. Drawing substantially on the analysis by Berliner (1994), Weick pulls out as pivotal:

... The compression of experience into the single word ‘intuition’ [which] desperately needs to be unpacked because it is the very nature of this process that makes improvisation possible and separates good from bad improvisation. (Weick, 2001, p. 286)

Weick then puts forward a framework of four stages of variation on an initial melody which he derives via Berliner from Lee Konitz (*ibid.*, p. 287) and which is transposed into tabular form and rule-following language on page 94.

To what extent does Weick’s thinking illuminate my narrative? Weick and the sources on which he draws emphasise that improvisation involves preparation as well as unplanned spontaneity. This relationship is of a particular kind, in which Weick conceives of spontaneity as arising as a result of special conditions. This is apparent when, having reviewed a number of conceptualisations, Weick finds it ‘hard to improve’ (*ibid.*, p. 285) on the following:

Improvisation involves reworking precomposed material and designs in relation to unanticipated ideas conceived, shaped and transformed under the special conditions of performance, thereby adding unique features to every creation. (Berliner, 1994, p. 241)

The ‘special conditions’ of performance are not analysed in an exhaustive way because Weick focuses more on the output of improvisation than the process (I shall return to this point in making a comparison with Dreyfus). But a number of features are clearly suggested. Most especially they include an unusually attentive listening by the performer in real time to herself and to fellow performers:

If you’re not affected and influenced by your own notes when you improvise, then you’re missing the whole essential point. (Konitz cited in Weick, 2001, p. 291)

Wynton Marsalis observed that in playing, as in conversation, the worst people to talk to and play with are those who, ‘when you’re talking, they’re thinking about what they are going to tell you next, instead of listening to what you’re saying’. (ibid., p. 293)

Jazz performance also involves expectations and valuations of difference, intensified by – we may infer – themes of control, fear and shame, which play some part in the process of creation. For example we may contrast:

... [Charlie Mingus] reduced a promising young saxophonist to tears before an audience with his running commentary of ‘Play something different, man; play something different. This is jazz, man. You played that last night and the night before.’ (Ibid., p. 289)

with Weick’s frequent suggestion that especially valuable and difficult to produce are transformative changes and major reworkings (again quoting Berliner):

... A soloist’s most salient experiences in the heat of performance involve poetic leaps of imagination to phrases that are unrelated, or only minimally related, to the storehouse, as when the identities of formerly mastered patterns melt away entirely within recombinant shapes. (Berliner, 1994, pp. 216-217)

## THE WEICK/KONITZ MODEL OF IMPROVISATION

<i>Level of improvisation</i>	<i>Brief summary</i>	<i>Transposed description<sup>32</sup> with suggested comparison points in the Dreyfus model of expertise</i>
No improvisation	The source melody is performed exactly as given	An unchanging rule (the source melody) is followed exactly – novice
Interpretation	The performer takes minor liberties (novel accents or dynamics) while performing the source melody basically as written	Some situational elements within the context of an essentially unchanging rule – advanced beginner and/or competent performer
Embellishment	Whole phrases in the original are anticipated or delayed beyond their usual placements; the melody is rephrased but recognizable	Some departure from a still-recognisable rule but no new material is created in real time – competent (or, if the re-phrasings are not rehearsed in advance) proficient performer
Variation	Clusters of notes not in the original melody are inserted, but their relationship to the original melody is made clear	Substantial departures from a still-recognisable rule – proficient performer
Improvisation	The melody is transformed into patterns bearing little or no resemblance to the original model or using models altogether alternative to the melody as the basis for inventing new phrases	The rule while providing a starting point has been left almost completely behind, with substantial real time creation of original material – expert performer

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<sup>32</sup> The brief summary in the second column uses Weick's language; the transposed description in this column is my own.

I experience some parts of Weick's understanding as illuminating my narrative but others as alien. The three hour conversation has a number of the characteristics of 'a performance'. The themes of spontaneous creation, intensive real-time listening to self and other, control, fear and possible shame are visible in the narrative and, it would appear, put to creative work. Moreover the whole performance rests on a substantial foundation of preparation, by Keith as well as myself.

However Weick's insistence that 'improvisation involves reworking precomposed material' (quoted above) only partially meshes with my excitement and fear on discovering that one of Keith's principal interests, farming, was something on which I had no 'precomposed material'. At no point during the two days remaining before the interview did I try to find and read materials on farming. The relationship of expert intuition and its products to precomposed material seem to me closer to Dreyfus' suggestions than to Weick's.

The preoccupation with precomposed material is in fact foundational to the method of classification set out in the second column of the table on page 94, and leads to a substantial problem. An explicit comparison with the Dreyfus model provides a way to approach this issue.

There are broad similarities though not exact correspondences with the Dreyfus model, indicated by the five-level structure and my interpretations in the third column of the Weick table. This provides some encouragement that both may point, imperfectly, towards a pattern of increasing complexity found in a broad range of skilled human activity – ie that this pattern is not simply an artefact of Dreyfus' or Weick's observational framework. An obvious difference is that Dreyfus describes how the performer acts while Weick describes what the performer takes in and produces. Here we return to the point about precomposed material.

Weick/Konitz's scale of improvisation is exclusively a function of the input (source) melody and the output (improvised) melody. The classifications in the second column could be adjudicated by a suitably programmed computer equipped with the input and output sound recordings. Take as a source melody any memorable tune. On

Weick's classification (but not Dreyfus'), anyone who improvised a random message in Morse code on a single musical note would be classified as an expert improviser. This is because of the radical extent of the transformation in tunes, and because the second column analyses melodies (and differences between melodies) as information processing signals rather than a social language.

This outcome is not what Weick intends. But the second column on page 94 only makes his intended sense if the melodies submitted to its adjudication already make sense to some human 'speakers of jazz'. The true improviser must not only make change but, in a social context (or in solo play rooted in a social context), *make meaning* by making change. This requirement Weick only notices inconsistently and does not develop.

For example, the intrinsically social is apparent when Weick writes:

Discussions of improvisation in groups are built on images of call and response, give and take ... . (Weick, 2001, p. 293)

However only a few lines earlier Weick cites the musician Stan Getz as if Getz' implied concept of language was equivalent:

It's like a language. You learn the alphabet, which are the scales. You learn sentences, which are the chords. And then you talk extemporaneously with the horn. ... Musically I love to talk just off the top of my head. (Ibid., p. 293)

In other words, the intuitive process of improvisation to which Weick draws attention has, as part of the act of genesis, a necessarily social dimension which he ignores. This has practical consequences. It leads him to value creative difference based on the distance between symbols, not the distance between meanings; I find myself doing the reverse.

For example in musical terms, the singer-songwriter Bruce Springsteen released one of his most famous tracks 'Born To Run' in 1975. He was 24, it was played loud and fast and included as a critical lyric, 'We gotta get out while we're young'. By the



time he was 40 he would from time to time perform a solo acoustic version of the same song: quieter, more slowly, but with unchanged tune and lyrics. In the Weick/Konitz classification, this is no more than interpretation, the least-valued form of modification. This misses that the meaning of the whole song, and not least of the unchanged lyric line above, has been transformed – close to reversed.

Or in professional terms I contrast my work with Keith with that with another client, Lewis, who is approaching sixty years old. He runs, as he has for the past thirty years, a small consultancy of half a dozen people providing specialist communication services mainly to FTSE 100 corporates. Retirement is not beckoning: rather Lewis' anxiety at potentially being trapped is not dissimilar to Keith's, but the changes which it is pertinent for him to explore are small (no farming here: in five years' time he is likely to be still working three days a week for his present firm). To understand these changes from the outside is to consider them small. To understand these changes from the inside – what they will cost Lewis and offer him, emotionally, relationally, creatively, financially and in other ways – is to appreciate their size.

Does the objection which I have raised to Weick apply to Dreyfus? The latter model was created to demonstrate the irreproducibility of high levels of human expertise by machine. So, by focussing on human action and transformation, not simply outputs, it would not categorise the monotonal 'Morse improviser' as an expert, and does not fall into the first part of this trap. But while the final column of the table on page 89 does not suffer from the same weakness as the Weick/Konitz model, I now notice that it suffers from an analogous one. Its progressive gradations of skill using differing patterns of rational analysis and 'holistic similarity recognition' also only say something intelligible on a particular assumption: namely that the outputs which the performer produces are socially recognisable as increasing in quality. Without such a presupposition of quality, the scale gradations describe the process of getting drunk as well as the process of becoming expert.

A final observation on Weick. He reaches a curious aesthetic crescendo about the relationship which he perceives between the special conditions of skilled jazz performance and what goes on in everyday life:

To watch jazz improvisation unfold is to have palpable contact with the human condition. Awe, at such moments, is understandable. (Ibid., p. 297)

Might one not have ‘palpable contact’ with the human condition by being alive? Might we not find the same patterns in things which all of us do every day? In this respect, too, Dreyfus’ approach is different: they introduce their model through riding a bicycle, and go on to say:

You know how to carry on a conversation, and how to do so appropriately in a wide variety of contexts with your family, your friends, at the office, in a party and with a stranger. Not only do you know what sorts of things to say in various social settings, but how far to stand from your conversational partner and what tone of voice to use. You almost certainly know how to walk. Yet the mechanics of walking on two legs is so complex that the best engineers cannot come even close to reproducing it in artificial devices. (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986, pp. 16-17)

#### **4.4 Towards social intuition and knowledge**

Some progress has been made in illuminating the experience narrated in section 4.2. A significant contemporary literature on intuition suggests that both expert and entrepreneurial intuition are present in the narrative, and distinguishes these in terms of evidenced effectiveness from first-impression heuristics. This is a distinction not yet developed to any substantial degree within either interviewing practice or research. I have begun to perceive the narrowness of the connections between interviewing and wider organisational practice and research; a narrowness (dominated by behavioural psychology) which may have implications for the choosing of leaders, given that interviewing remains a way of practical knowing preferred in the selection of senior executives and leaders.

I have examined the skills framework which is currently predominant as the ‘good practice’ model in recruiting and wider human resource management – the framework of competencies originated by Boyatzis. This exhibits limitations which increase the more senior the roles to which it is applied. It does not treat intuition explicitly, but moves first to posit and then to give close attention to context-

independent generic competencies (the skilful exercise of which may require much intuition), whereas ‘specialised knowledge’ is reduced to useable data and schemas.

By contrast, the Dreyfus model posits that human expertise across broad swathes of human activity is intrinsically context-dependent and typically has the potential to develop within a scale of increasing complexity and involvement, for which they propose five levels. Development of skill within this framework implies greater involvement and intuition (non-linear, arational thinking). This model enabled a significant movement of my thought. My narrated entrepreneurial intuition – the creation of three hour conversations within a supporting structure for the purpose of career advice - no longer appeared either *ex nihilo*, or at best distantly connected to my other ‘expert intuitions’. The Dreyfus model also made new sense of my wider experience as a recruiter in assessing the skills of others.

Weick/Konitz also offer a five level model of the products of improvisation, conceived as a process which depends upon practice and precomposed elements, but in which greater intuitive skill yields increasingly radical, unplanned change from source materials. This model shed some light but less than Dreyfus’ on my narrative. It also verged on meaninglessness in the absence of an interactive social understanding of the activity being modelled, a critical constituent element to which Weick refers, but inconsistently.

Reconsideration of the Dreyfus model showed that, with differences from Weick, nevertheless it too suffered from a significant weakness in its social nature. It is striking that, with the exception of adult language learners, the Dreyfus model was developed from studying skill acquisition in relation to tools rather than activities involving the full intricacy of human relating (leadership, say, or interviewing)<sup>33</sup>.

I return to the contemporary thinking on intuition which I introduced in section 4.3.2 to put the social aspect at the centre of our consideration. Possibly because at an early stage Jung linked intuition with a function which he hypothesised of

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<sup>33</sup> Chess-playing and car-driving do involve other people, but with restricted degrees of freedom. Nursing, which provided the model with some corroboration, is of course a socially complex activity.  
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‘transmitting perceptions in an unconscious way’ (Dane & Pratt, 2007, p. 35), most mainstream thinkers about intuition have taken pains to localise it within single individuals. For example, Crossan *et al* stipulate that:

... [Intuiting] only affects others when they attempt to (inter)act with [the intuiting] individual. (Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999, p. 525)

What is more interesting is how bound to the individual such thinkers’ concepts of intuition remain even as they explicitly address its implications for collective knowing and action (as the texts from which the next three citations come all do). The point has a taken-for-granted quality – no experiments are reported to test the following firm assertions - because intuition is framed as some cognitive/affective process within an individual body:

... Intuition is a uniquely individual process. It may happen within a group or organizational context, but the recognition of a pattern or possibility comes from within an individual. Organizations do not intuit. This is a uniquely human attribute that organizations do not possess ... . (Ibid., p. 525)

It is acknowledged that human beings intuit and organizations do not. (Sadler-Smith, 2008, p. 495)

The knowledge assets of a firm are mobilised and shared in *ba*<sup>34</sup>, where tacit knowledge *held by individuals* is converted and amplified by the spiral of knowledge through socialisation, externalisation, combination and internalisation. (Nonaka, Toyama, & Konno, 2000, p. 30)(emphasis added)

This leads to an extensive development of proposals for the management of organisational learning through processes which have a distinctly industrial, or even hydraulic, character. Crossan proposes that the first area for further research is:

... understanding the mechanisms that enhance or restrict the stocks and flows of learning. (Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999, p. 535)

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<sup>34</sup>*Ba* is a Japanese term introduced by Nonaka *et al* to refer to the social context for knowledge conversion and amplification between individuals. They refer to it as ‘shared context in motion ... *ba* provides the energy, quality and place to perform the individual conversions and to move along the knowledge spiral.’ (2000, p. 14)

Nonaka's amplifying spiral of knowledge reflects chaotic elements within organisations, including chaos deliberately introduced by leaders (Nonaka, Toyama, & Konno, 2000, p. 26) who – in a phrase to which the authors return several times – need to 'read the situation' (ibid., p. 26), in this case in order to know when and by how much to increase or decrease chaos. (This 'reading' of organisational situations is a key intuition, or tacit knowledge, which on this view leaders must possess.)

Dreyfus & Dreyfus do not articulate a particular organisational view, but the tenor of their work clearly has individual novices or experts as its focus. However their model was taken up in a major way by Bent Flyvbjerg (2001). He notes that:

... The Dreyfus model can be criticized for being slightly mechanistic and insensitive to issues of creativity, innovation and power. (Ibid., p. 22)

However Flyvbjerg is unconcerned by this because the single property of the model which he wishes to take up in his exploration of social science as a way of knowing is 'the qualitative jump ... from rule-based, context-independent to experience-based, situational behaviour' (ibid., p. 22) as skill progresses beyond competence.

Is it clear that intuition must be individual? Flyvbjerg himself cites a description of group virtuosity from a Danish book 'Football Angels' by Hans-Jørgen Nielsen. The description is worth repeating in detail:

We get a free kick, just within the other team's penalty zone, just to the right of the goal, and I take it, self-assuredly waving the others off, with the seductive movement which means that I and no one else knows what needs to be done. The opponents stand up in a wall in front of me in order to block a shot aimed at the goal, as I perhaps also had first thought, but suddenly, Franke stands next to them, far to the right, like an extension of their wall. This has happened during my approach, while everything is focused on me, and I keep running toward the ball as if to kick directly. When I get to it, I instead kick it in a very flat arc, over the defensive wall, and the ball would have taken the turf a few meters behind it. In the same moment, Franke has made his way around and has rushed toward the place where it would have landed. It never does, he catches it in the air with his right leg, half-gliding it into the goal with his left. No one else is able to grasp what has happened before he lifts his arms.

Soccer players tend to have this kind of thing with them from home, working on it over and over again during training. Franke and I have perhaps done something similar before, but never practiced it as something specific in this way, we don't exchange a word before I take the free-kick, not even a telling glance, everything happens during the run-up, completely natural, he just stands there where he stands, I just play him like he has to be played when he has positioned himself where he has suddenly positioned himself, the thought doesn't even become anything we are so aware of that it can become clear for us in advance. It is a shared knowledge, from the perspective of the body and the eyes, ready to become reality, and it is prior to our being able to speak about it as a language and an ego ... . (Ibid., p. 18)

I find this strongly suggestive of 'social intuition' or plural expertise, in which the subject explicitly rules out a model of (even non-verbal) interpersonal co-ordination. This is also precisely the mutual, dynamic, simultaneous and anticipative 'reading' of game situations posited by thinkers such as Bourdieu. A potentiality to act exists between people caught up in an on-going figuration – caught up not simply because physically present in a time and place, but drawn into an activity and what that activity makes possible and values – an activity which knowingly and unknowingly they sustain and modify as they participate in it.

Thus the approaches explored in this project all remain within an interactionist perspective, in which the starting point for thought is individual agency, atomic and pre-existing; and although within this constraint progress has been made, the constraint emerges as an important and fundamental one. In the final project I shall take up the radically social framework of games and *habitus* (Bourdieu).

Intuition emerges as intimately connected with practical knowing and what knowledge is. Turning back to the narrative, the question of social intuition which emerges can be framed like this: is the whole story, alongside and interwoven within its conscious elements, one continuous, fast, unrehearsed, skilled, non-conscious, social performance? Are Keith and I are running all the time to take free kicks, feinting, standing beside walls, lifting our arms? On this view 'social intuition' would not only be one type of intuition or way of knowing among others, but a

condition of possibility for our lives – and a condition of possibility therefore for our rational thinking. ‘Social intuition’ might be hard to see because it is ubiquitous.

## Chapter Five: Transition from Project Three to Project Four

### Moving to a radically social framework of thought

Project Three explored intuition from the standpoint of my professional practice and found significant insight in the model of expertise offered by Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus (1986). However it concluded by noticing that neither this model, nor the model of skilful improvisation offered by Weick (2001) with which I compared it, made sense except against a hitherto unremarked background of social sense-making and practice. Project Three, then, invited but did not carry out a radically social exploration of interviewing – where ‘radically social’ refers to frameworks of thought in which individuality emerges out of or with society, as opposed to atomic frameworks which may emphasise society but conceive of it as the interactions of already-given individuals. I take up that task in the context of a senior recruitment project in Project Four, drawing on the thought of Pierre Bourdieu.

We can place the movement of thought in Project Three in a larger context. With hindsight, the realisation that neither the Dreyfus nor Weick models make sense without a taken-for-granted social ground is, writ small, the movement in Western thought which the philosopher Charles Taylor associates with Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (Taylor, 1997, pp. 20-33).

Taylor reprises Wittgenstein’s argument that it is impossible to make sense of any apparently abstract, context-free rule without ultimately appealing to a shared context or ‘common sense’. How might we start to grasp this common ground? Taylor suggests:

In recent years Pierre Bourdieu has coined a term to capture this level of social understanding, the *habitus*. This is one of the key terms we need to give an account of the background understanding invoked above. (Ibid., p. 171)



## **Intuition**

What happens to intuition, the central thrust of Project Three? As that project (section 4.4) showed, intuition is generally understood as an atomic concept. Therefore the term appears much less frequently in Project Four. However the continuity between these Projects in terms of the questions to which ‘intuition’ has pointed is strong.

I used ‘intuition’ to explore two feelings which I associated with acting as a purposeful, knowledgeable agent (Project Three, section 4.2.2):

... A feeling of capacity of action into the unknown (*I know* what to do) which may be mistaken but is not racked by doubt ... and is distinct from knowing by rational calculation.

[This] appears in two forms: micro-patternings in the course of conversations and a large, singular leap ... .

The large leap explored in Project Three was my creation of three hour interviews as a central feature of my new business. The questions, then, are about how we find possibilities for action into the unknown in which we experience knowing what to do, and in feeling we so know, take innumerable small steps and occasional large ones. In posing the question whether these two-fold aspects of intuitive capacity for action could be considered a social phenomenon, I closed Project Three with a detailed description by Nielsen of a football free kick.

Compare this with Bourdieu’s concept of practice:

A player who is involved and caught up in the game adjusts not to what he sees but to what he fore-sees, sees in advance in the directly perceived present; he passes the ball not to the spot where his team-mate is but to the spot he will reach – before his opponent – a moment later, anticipating the anticipations of the others and, as when ‘selling a dummy’, seeking to confound them. He decides in terms of objective probabilities, that is, in response to an overall, instantaneous assessment of the whole set of his opponents and the whole set of his team-mates, seen not as they are but in their impending positions. And he does so ‘on the spot’, ‘in the twinkling of an eye’, ‘in the heat of the moment’, that is,

in conditions which exclude distance, perspective, detachment and reflexion. (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 81)

At this point the narrative of choosing learning sets in Project One (section 2.9) begins to invite a new interpretation. It now stands out as a vivid account of an experience of the collapse of agency – of not knowing how, in small or large steps, to move forward. In it I experience the opposite of what I have been focussing on as intuition.

The shift to the perspective of practice is also part of a larger philosophical current. Dreyfus develops this theme in his exposition of Heidegger:

... Heidegger has a more radical reason for saying that we cannot get clear about the ‘beliefs’ about being that we seem to be taking for granted. There are no beliefs to get clear about; there are only skills and practices. These practices do not arise from beliefs, rules or principles, so there is nothing to make explicit or spell out. (Dreyfus, 1991, pp. 21-22)<sup>35</sup>

### **A personal change**

Leaving until Project Four my reasons for choosing Bourdieu instead of another radically social thinker, taking up some such perspective is work which I *need* to do – whatever I feel about it - to further my inquiry. But in the transition from Project Three to Project Four (via a progression *viva*) the way I make sense of the world has changed. In personal terms the journey hitherto now seems a ‘testing to destruction’ of the fundamentally atomic and Cartesian understandings which I had of myself and others when I began this research. The contrasting perspective which I will explore in Project Four still feels strange and unfamiliar, but I am no longer exploring something ‘out there’ in the literature. It has become my own perspective.

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<sup>35</sup> A different route to a similar juncture also descends through Mead (1934) (and Project Two, section 9): see for example ‘A (neo) American in Paris: Bourdieu, Mead and Pragmatism’ (Aboulafia, 1999).

## **Project Four: Senior selection interviewing as a radically social practice**

### **5.1 Introduction**

An opportunity arose contemporaneously with this research to act as adviser and interviewer in the recruitment of a chief executive to an organisation which was new to me.

The Simon Trust<sup>36</sup> is a grant-making charity with a non-executive business, academic and specialist board of about 12 and a staff of about 20. The unexpected early retirement of their chief executive has just been announced. The only board member known to me (Andrew, the treasurer)<sup>37</sup> introduces me to Bryan, a businessman and chair of the trust. Grant-giving trusts is an area in which I have some experience.

In week 1 the board appoints a search firm to identify candidates (by advertisement as well as by private approaches) and myself as an expert adviser. The narrative (section 5.2) begins when the board begins to select candidates (week 7). It seeks to convey a sense of the interwoven patterning of multiple individuals influencing each other in the processing of choosing one from multiple others. Of course many stories remain untold: such as how and why the candidate field changes from 15 women out of 56, to 3 out of 20 in the longlist (in my judgement not the strongest 3), to 1 out of 6 in the shortlist.

There is a shortage of research material about ‘live’ selection processes at senior level. The narrative review of 278 studies on interviewing since 1989 (Posthuma, Morgeson, & Campion, 2002) demonstrates the predominance of studies at well below board level, experiments with university students being paid to act in artificial interviews, and so forth. Indeed as a live, top-level study Russell’s (1990), on page

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<sup>36</sup> Not its real name.

<sup>37</sup> Client personnel are named alphabetically starting with Andrew, candidates are named towards the rear of the alphabet starting with Xavier. Implied genders are correct.

77, stands out as a rarity. Bozionelos (2005) postulates the selection of professorial candidates on political and ideological grounds, but he did not observe or participate in the process which he investigates. Khurana's study of selection processes at the top of corporate America cited on page 81 relies on agents' *ex post* accounts (2002).

By contrast this study is of contemporaneous action produced under the conditions of urgency, incomplete information and involvement. I am under the normal commercial pressure to protect my reputation and 'deliver value' to the Simon Trust in return for charging £1,600 a day. My client and most of the candidates have even more at stake.

## **5.2 The recruitment of a chief executive**

### **5.2.1 The arrival of strangers; the longlist meeting (week 7)**

I have been having confidential discussions with the Trust's senior staff. A common thread is their desire for reassurance: I tell stories to get across that I understand how frightening the present situation is. The departing chief executive was long-serving, and his early retirement unanticipated. Now his replacement is to be chosen by a non-executive board: the staff will not participate. Andrew and Bryan devote perhaps a day a week to the Trust, other trustees perhaps a day a month.

The chief executive's departure has upturned the world of the Trust's staff and other stakeholders. Who now has real authority? Will colleagues try to leap over their peers? Is there a 'land grab' by the chair? How will loyalty to the past chief executive now be evaluated? For a time even familiar faces become strangers, and real strangers have appeared 'out of nowhere' – an adviser and a search firm. These strangers are entrusted with a share in the organisation's most private deliberations from which others are excluded. And they are simply tokens of the prospect that the organisation itself will shortly be headed by a stranger.

In week 7 we reach the longlist meeting: an evening meeting with the search firm and myself present, but no staff. The previous business overruns. We take something over an hour. No doubt most of us are tired.

A booklet prepared by the search firm gives summarised career details of the 21 candidates whom the firm – based on paper inspection - judges closest to the Trust's advertised requirement. It also lists 35 other candidates who either applied or were approached through the search but are judged less relevant. For confidentiality, the booklets are taken back by the search firm at the end of the discussion. Two days previously the search firm had given Bryan and myself a preview of the booklet's contents. The intended outcome of the meeting is agreement on a list of about 15 individuals (the 'long list') whom the search firm will then interview.

Alphabetically the first name is that of Xavier. At the preview stage, Bryan was excited about him – someone of national reputation, known to Bryan, and in Bryan's view a 'star'. The search consultant's voice and Bryan's expression are neutral as Bryan looks round the table for the first comments. Bryan emphasises that this is an early stage of the recruitment process, and he is only looking for quick comments.

The first comment, from Curtis, is quick enough. 'I will resign if Xavier is appointed.' Twenty-eight eyes dart in his direction, to see if he is joking. Apparently not. 'He [Xavier] is a disaster where he is. He has got *everything* wrong in the last few years. He has *no idea* what good is [in this field].'

After a brief pause, Bryan responds in a measured tone. 'I disagree. I know Xavier and his work quite well. I think he has done an excellent job in a difficult situation.'

Curtis: 'Simply ask *anyone* in the field [ie a practitioner or specialist, not a manager].'

Another trustee: 'Yes, Xavier is a good *administrator*. Probably. But he's got no imagination, no charisma. He's the opposite of the change we need here.'

Another trustee: 'He hides behind pillars. Behind his spectacles.' (Several trustees laugh.)

Bryan: ‘Well, I know him pretty well and I think what he’s done is pretty amazing.’  
Pause. ‘Well, let’s carry on through the list and see where we get. We’ll probably need to come back.’

Formally we never do come back, because the meaning of this exchange only becomes clear as we work through several more candidates. We reach one where two trustees say concretely, ‘I think this one should be dropped from the list,’ ‘I agree, not worth the search firm seeing.’ Gradually we construe that the candidacies of Xavier, and some others also subject to lively exchanges, will survive to the next stage.

In terms of the arrival of strangers, the exemplar is Yves. Yves is in his 50s and has spent all his working life in business, reaching main board level in nationally known companies. He left this career a few years ago and has involved himself in some of the Trust’s main specialist areas. Nevertheless he is a clear outsider. No-one knows anything about him beyond his own cv. Yves is one of 4 outsiders among the 20 allowed by the board to go onto the ‘longlist’.

Bryan reminds the board of the next steps. He expects that board members will not object, and he is right. Bryan will choose an interview panel of about five, including myself. In week 11 the search firm will submit to this panel a written report on their longlist interviews, and the panel will agree on a shortlist (of perhaps 4). Before being interviewed by the panel each shortlisted candidate will have a private hour to ask Bryan questions. A short board meeting scheduled for week 14 will ratify (or throw out) the panel’s choice.

### **5.2.2 Weeks 13 and 14 – the final interviews**

The shortlist accepted by the panel comprises 6 candidates, including Xavier and Yves. Except for Zelda all are men; Yves is the only manifest outsider. The list is closely in line with the search firm’s advice. In the meantime I have drafted and sent the panel a one-page checklist of what to look for in the candidates (see page 142).

Besides Bryan (chair), the panel comprises Andrew (treasurer), Diane (a trustee with experience in communications and marketing), Eric (an expert in one of the Trust's specialisms) and myself. We decide on interviews of 50 minutes each, beginning with 2-3 minutes of opening remarks in which we ask the candidates to sketch out two or three possibilities for imaginative change at the Trust. For diary reasons the interviews are spread over two days. My checklist is agreed without amendments; the panel are happy for me to suggest based on the checklist areas of questioning on which each panel member should lead, taking into account their personal preferences.

In the event the six opening remarks vary between 4 and 20 minutes, and the interviews between 45 to 60 minutes. Candidates with long opening remarks do badly. Bryan's manner is welcoming to the candidates, and he sticks to his agreed areas of questioning. I am pleased that panel members do not interrupt each other, and often ask candidates to back up their answers with examples of concrete experience (both things which I had advised). In other respects my professional structure is ignored: several panel members wander 'off-piste' in their questioning (mainly into others' areas, rather than irrelevant areas); few use the checklist after the interviews to rate the candidates.

Zelda is the third candidate we interview on the first day. While there are issues to ponder about each of the first two candidates, the mood is upbeat as I bring Zelda – an elegant, poised woman - into the room. Her reputation in fund-raising is well-known. The question preoccupying me is that her experience has been for nearly 20 years in one institution which she dominates: the task of extrapolation to the Simon Trust is difficult (almost as difficult as with Yves).

As in the other interviews, I scribble down a phrase or two of every question and answer.

In her 5 minute opening, delivered without notes, Zelda offers three suggestions. I regard the first as sensible but not exciting. Another is about more intensive celebrity patronage (something for which she is particularly noted). Certainly a plus for the

Trust were she appointed but, in context, not very imaginative. Finally, she wonders about setting up a fund for emergency grants from the Trust. Since the Fund's resources are already quite liquid, without a sense of how new income could be raised for such a fund this strikes me as vacuous.

Bryan probes the emergency fund suggestion, but no further substance is forthcoming. This pattern is repeated in some other exchanges. As he has with all the candidates, Eric asks for a concrete example of the candidate's engagement with the Trust's specialisms within the past year or two. Zelda has little to offer. That remains the case when Eric tries another variant of the question.

My rear-guard slot is approaching. My colleagues' questions strike me as progressively more ingratiating ('I don't know if you have a view about' in a kindly tone versus 'What is your view of' in a more energetic tone). The panel have switched off (I think); they only want to reach a polite end. All the more important, then, for me not to do that: I want to give Zelda the best chance I can to overturn the hypothesis forming in my mind, which is that she is a potent and charming influencer well below the necessary intellectual grade.

I express warm admiration for her achievements in nearly 20 years at her present institution. 'Although your job title remained the same, I'm sure the job itself changed a lot during that time. Could you divide it into different phases for us, and pick out the most important skills which you were learning in each phase?'

Zelda's answer is in terms of bricks and mortar – the development of her site – and growth in client numbers, with no reference to skills.

I am focussed on her, listening and smiling. I repeat back appreciatively part of her answer, and try again. 'That was very interesting in terms of the building, but could you help me understand the changes in terms of your skills? How did what you as chief executive had to concentrate on doing change?'

She retraces the previous answer.



I close the door after she has gone and am turning back towards my colleagues. Some have started to stand up, others are stretching. Even before anyone has spoken my world has begun to spin. I sense that my interpretation of this interview is markedly adrift from most, if not all, of the others. So it proves. Following the order of questioning, I give my opinion last. Eric notes that Zelda's answers to his questions were weak, but the consensus is clear – she is a strong candidate. 'What a good candidate.' 'She could do it, no question.' Few of the comments are reasoned or evidential - 'Think of the money she'd bring in' might be the closest to this. But they are emotional – relieved, delighted.

An intense challenge has suddenly arisen. I am drawing on all my professional instincts and brainpower. I know I want to stimulate a discussion about reasons and evidence – what is leading each of us towards the judgements we are proffering? But my feeling is that the amount of reflection, or consideration of 'data', which the panel will swallow will be limited. Moreover my instinct is if I underplay the gap between us, even for this tiny window I will not stimulate any serious consideration of a U-turn.

I smile: 'I guess this one could be quite difficult.' I stop smiling. 'I thought that interview was dire.' There is surprise in the room. 'We've seen three candidates today. The only one I strongly feel could not do the job is the last one.'

From my notes, I take them semi-verbatim through two or three of the exchanges which I think most clearly evidence the range and depth of my concerns. But the discussion does not last more than five minutes. Bryan sums up the consensus – Zelda's answers on a number of fronts were weak, but in particular on the intellectual front, I am setting the bar too high. She would bring in money – 'Boy, would she bring in money. If we raise more money, we can do more. If we don't, it doesn't really matter how clever our director is.'

That we are interviewing over two days is a stroke of luck, so I encourage us all (including myself) to continue reflecting. I re-read my notes and spend over an hour

thinking. No question - in her present institution Zelda is an outstanding fund-raiser. If I could satisfy myself that she would be an outstanding fund-raiser for the Simon Trust, then she would represent a rational choice for the trustees - albeit not one who (as best I can foresee) will deliver anything like the sweeping change which the board discussed in week 1. But boards are entitled to change their mind, and it is not unusual to find that a chair wants a weaker chief executive than he claims to want.

Yet by the second day I still do not believe that Zelda will be an effective fund-raiser for the Simon Trust. The central purpose of her present institution is tangible: that of the Simon Trust is abstract. The intellectual dimension matters. I wonder how the second day will turn out. Experience tells me Zelda might well be appointed. I will try to keep my powder dry, and if I need to speak on this, I aim to be brief, restrained, evidential and clear. There is no guarantee that I am right but my considered view is what the Trust is paying for.

I never need to give that speech. Andrew and Diane volunteer that on reflection they have adjusted their assessments of Zelda downwards. Also Xavier and Yves power their way through to positions which (all agree) are well ahead of the other candidates.

The panel is excited about Yves – Andrew, who hungers for radical change, particularly so. I comment that in Yves’ case I have rarely seen an outsider provide such a compelling interview – not only in terms of answers given and the manner of answering, but in terms of the experience pointed to by those answers. Bryan is delighted to have two strong candidates together with some back-up possibilities, but also nervous at the risk of hastily appointing someone who has very little track record in the Simon Trust’s fields. The ratification board meeting is this evening.

At my suggestion the panel agrees to seek the board’s authority to appoint (without further reference back to the board) either Xavier or Yves after further inquiries. The key elements for further inquiry – I argue – are thorough reference-checking particularly of Yves by the search firm; and further time spent by Bryan with each of the two (as chair he most directly needs to build a relationship with the appointed

candidate and will bear the brunt of a poor decision). We also agree on a challenge to Curtis to state the basis of his resignation claim against Xavier.

### **5.2.3 Week 14 – the final board meeting**

After an hour's break, we re-assemble at 6pm. Apart from the interview panel and myself, only three board members not on the panel show up, which angers Bryan. Because of the resignation claim he calls Curtis, and reaches him. Curtis claims not to have known about the meeting. Bryan says, 'I was there when you wrote it in your diary' and withdraws to carry on the conversation in private.

Bryan returns. He is tired but leads the meeting through a thorough account of the panel's work since the shortlist was agreed. From the telephone conversation he discloses that Curtis has never met or talked to Xavier, nor heard anything specifically untoward about him. He made his claim from more general perceptions. There is some consternation around the table.

The board members give the panel the endorsement they have requested. Therefore they are open to both Xavier and Yves, but one trustee in particular returns three times to the point that 'none of us have ever heard of Yves. One simply does not make appointments at this level of people of whom no-one has ever heard. It's very dangerous.'

There is no more discussion because it is late and the panel is being given the authority which they need. I say to Bryan that in my experience, in asking Yves for several different people to speak to about him, the search firm will rapidly find some whom Bryan knows who also know Yves. But that point does not come to decision. Within the next forty-eight hours Bryan spends a further hour and a half with each of Xavier and Yves, and chooses Xavier.

## **5.3 First reflections on the narrative**

### **5.3.1 Primary questions**

Project Three began to explore the nature of expertise. Section 5.2 is an extended narrative of professional expertise in practice. I take as primary the question, can we throw new light on the nature of this (purported) professionalism?

Narrative invites attention to its surprises: in this case Curtis' dramatic intervention against Xavier, and the different readings of Zelda's interview. I observe the first but am a leading actor in the second. These are obvious points of entry.

But professional expertise also expresses itself in routines – such as how I try to organise the committee to interview or my preparation of a checklist. What difference do these actions make? Is my work as a professional different from the work which I think I am carrying out?

In this project I also start where Project Three finished, by taking up a radically social way of understanding ourselves.

In the three preceding projects I worked to obtain more adequate accounts of things which had surprised or puzzled me, in some cases for years. Necessarily those were discrepancies judged from within my habitual (atomic) thinking. 'Obvious' surprises such as Zelda's interview or Curtis' intervention may still be discrepancies of this kind. A major shift in thinking is likely to mean noticing the narrative differently: the unnoticed or the routine may come into surprising focus (as the social taken-for-granted did towards the end of Project Three)<sup>38</sup>.

### **5.3.2 A stuck account of professionalism**

Am I doing what I think I am doing? What do I think I am doing? I take up this question in terms of the checklist (reproduced in the Appendix on page 142). My checklist is an expression of the 'person specification' in this particular recruitment - a concept regarded within recruitment as fundamental (Dale, 2006, p. 27).

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<sup>38</sup> This suggestion partly echoes Kuhn's ideas about changes in world view (1970, pp. 111-135).

In any book about recruitment and selection, competency-based or otherwise, there should be only one place to begin, and that is with the question: what do we want to measure? (Wood & Payne, 1998, p. 20)

Looking at the checklist now, I see I sweated over it. It is not lifted from another organisation with just the specialist fields (P and Q) changed. It does not ask for a track record of generic 'leadership' but of 'leadership of innovation' – itself carefully chosen instead of '[individual] creativity'. It is on one side of paper, and tries to focus attention on an even smaller subset of requirements – five. I have learned many times that the capacity of a selection process to focus meaningfully on more than a handful of issues is very limited. And so on.

Immediately I am inclined to dismiss this work of professional craft as of no practical use. It was little used in panel members' note-taking. In making critical judgements – such as that between Xavier and Yves – the panel did not refer back to the categories in the checklist. In Zelda's case the checklist 'failed' me: the dimension (intellectual capability) on which I found her wanting was part of the background which I took for granted – that dimension does not appear in the checklist at all. The checklist is an expensive 'make work' product which shows that the supposed professionalism of this activity is empty.

This 'exchange' captures two voices which I recognise as influential in thinking about senior selection interviewing. One voice is that of the professional-as-scientist, trying to facilitate a tricky act of collective measurement. The other is that of the cynic, the shrewd and battered survivor of numerous unspoken power shifts in organisations, who sees everything as hollow, self-serving or both. This dialogue strikes me as stuck: a barren, repetitive clash. I want in this research to find a different way to articulate the professionalism of my practice – dismissing neither of these perspectives but attending to a reality more complex than either.

Thus the cynical view ignores a number of things which the production of the checklist actually did. Agreement to it enabled me to shape the areas of questioning which panel members pursued; even if some veered into colleagues' areas, no-one

veered into irrelevant ones. (The judgement of relevance is of course bound up with power relations as well as any improvement to my client's process.)

For panel members other than Bryan the checklist was the first tangible product by which they could judge my professionalism. Producing a generic template or something which commanded little agreement (or not producing anything at all) would have damaged my credibility. The checklist increased my power.

Power to do what? What is my motivation in acting in this narrative – for example, in steering questions towards 'relevant' areas? Are there any clues to something more complex than cynicism (I am pursuing money, status and my impact on other people's and organisations' lives) versus science (I am interested in the selection of an objectively best candidate)?

Whether good or not, the checklist was crafted. I invested time and thought in producing it. I acted as if there were standards in such things – not written down anywhere but standards nonetheless – and as if I owed this organisation a good job. But 'this organisation' does not exist in any tangible sense: it is language which I am using to cover different shifts in different situations.

Thus the checklist is part of my 'loyalty' to the worried staff who are not part of the selection process: the way it describes the managerial and trustee relationship skills required remind me of those staff discussions. With Zelda, I give my 'loyalty' to something beyond or beside the chair: I put my relationship with Bryan at risk when I challenge so directly his view of her. Later I also protect him from being 'bounced' by a majority of the panel into choosing Yves, or from having the decision taken out of his hands by the full board. I do this out of my belief that it will be disastrous to recruit Yves as chief executive if the chair's agreement is only half-hearted. What of Andrew, who got me the work at the Trust? He sees Yves as the right radical counterweight to Bryan's caution. Have I been loyal to Andrew?

Does my self-understanding as a professional aiming to do work which meets ‘standards’ and which puts the interests of my client ‘organisation’ first simply cover up an idiosyncratic, self-indulgent shifting of direction in successive conversations?

## **5.4 Re-thinking skill**

### **5.4.1 The perspective of practice**

Practice is human action under the conditions of urgency, uncertainty and involvement referred to on page 108. Its essence is expressed in the two footballing accounts given as we made the transition from Project Three. In developing this perspective we overturn two tenets of Cartesian thought.

Firstly, the logic of practice stands in contrast to the atemporal, reflexive, detached logic of theory (Bourdieu, 1990a, pp. 81-82). The logic of theory is the logic of abstract thought in ‘I think, therefore I am’. The solitary Cartesian mind thinks first (its thinking is what it finds it cannot doubt). Then it considers action in the world in terms of the categories of thought. But in human history and in every human life practical action comes first: detached thought is a subsequent accomplishment. We shall therefore be exploring the idea that practice is primary relative to theory.

Secondly, a radically social perspective cannot take as given our usual idea of individuals acting atomically in an external environment. We must start with something that is already irredeemably social: for Bourdieu<sup>39</sup> this starting point is *habitus*.

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<sup>39</sup> An important Anglo-American view exemplified by Sewell (1992) and Stones (2005) is that Bourdieu’s practice parallels Anthony Giddens’ structuration theory (1979). I do not take up Giddens because, despite resemblances, I believe Giddens diverges from Bourdieu on both the points just made. Stones gets to the kernel of the matter when he says: ‘Giddens’ distinctive conception of structuration is derived ‘transcendentally’ in the following sense. He begins from something in the social world that can reasonably and without controversy be agreed to exist. He then works backwards to ask what other things must also exist as preconditions for this something whose existence is uncontroversial. The latter, in Giddens’ case, is simply the fact that people engage in actions and interactions.’ (Stones, 2005, pp. 21-22) In other words Giddens constructs practice through the logic of theory - the reverse of Bourdieu’s project.

#### 5.4.2 *Habitus* and field

A key shift in Project Three was to notice the dependence of communication and thought on an unstated background ‘common sense’. Speech is a paradigm practice: the practical sense, thick with nuance and possibility, which experienced speakers have of a living language is a classic example of such a common sense. This sense is different for different people, but it does not intelligibly belong to any one person. Widened beyond language, such a common sense introduces us to the meaning of *habitus* (Taylor, 1997, p. 171), of whom the leading exponent in the last century was Norbert Elias.

In ‘The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of *Habitus* in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries’ (1996) Elias illuminates the micro-patterns which he sees as constituting long-term macro-processes: in this case national identity. For example at the close of the nineteenth century ‘common sense’ for Germans included the ‘honour society’, whose members were visible through duelling scars on their faces. They asserted the right (and duty) to settle disagreements with each other outside the normal, plebeian law. The collision of this once-aristocratic *habitus* with the democratic settlement imposed at the end of the First World War had (Elias argues) specifically German political repercussions beyond economic reparations and national shame (ibid., p. 183).

*Habitus* for Elias is held in common. It is no superposition of atomic life-worlds (ibid., p. 67). One person’s *habitus* is meaningless. Here Bourdieu makes a critical (and complicating) shift. What is this shift and why is it relevant to this research?

If *habitus* is like language, let us call ‘German’ the common sense of the professional world to which the Simon Trust belongs. If so, Xavier and Zelda have worked in Germany all their lives. Xavier runs a large town, Zelda a village which she has put on the map. Stories true and false circulate about them. Yves grew up in France where he ran a large business. In the last few years he has bought a house in Germany and learned the language well, but is no native. The Simon Trust is perhaps Liechtenstein – German-speaking but small, vulnerable and different.



The appointment of any of the three will involve transplanting a living *body* from its accustomed world. The strength of Eliasian *habitus* is that in describing bodies-in-accustomed-worlds as one, it does not allow us to fall into atomic thinking. But the professional task in senior recruitment is to think adequately about different shared worlds of meaning and relatively abrupt, high-stakes moves between them.

Bourdieu separates Eliasian *habitus* into the interaction of *habitus* and field. For Bourdieu (and I will now follow this interpretation) *habitus* is that which is carried in the flesh of the individual and *field* is that which is carried externally – but neither making sense without the other:

The source of historical action ... is not an active subject confronting society as if that society were an object constituted externally. The source resides neither in consciousness nor in things but in the relationship between two stages of the social, that is, between the history objectified in things, in the form of institutions, and the history incarnated in bodies, in the form of that system of enduring dispositions which I call *habitus*. (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 190)

Social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in *habitus*, outside and inside of agents. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127)

*Unlike* positing a free (atomic) agent facing an external environment, Bourdieu's move is akin to tearing a banknote (Eliasian *habitus*) in half. He separates what is somatised in one agent from what is not, but insists on the common social and interlocking nature of each half. There is no individual life without a shared world of meaning (field). Society is always already under the skin of the individual and *vice versa*. Practice is what happens when field and *habitus* meet.

In Bourdieu's understanding of practice, agency is moulded but not extinguished, because agents exercise meaningful (though filtered) choices, which then affect their future filters. *Habitus* engrosses the agent in a way which emphasises some features of reality (those important to success in the corresponding field) but not others, and offers the agent as more or less obvious a selective set of possible actions:

In short, being the product of a particular class of objective regularities, the *habitus* tends to generate all the ‘reasonable’, ‘common-sense’ behaviours (and only these) which are possible within the limits of these regularities, and which are likely to be positively sanctioned because they are objectively adjusted to the logic characteristic of a particular field, whose objective future they anticipate. At the same time, ‘without violence, art or argument’ it tends to exclude all ‘extravagances’ (‘not for the likes of us’), that is, all the behaviours that would be negatively sanctioned because they are incompatible with the objective conditions. (Bourdieu, 1990a, pp. 55-56)

### 5.4.3 ‘My *habitus*’

Thus in some circumstances we can speak of the *habitus* of a person. We can do this when individuals move between different fields, or act in multiple fields simultaneously. ‘My’ *habitus* then means the pattern inscribed in me by the succession or collision of these fields: the particular collection of half-banknotes which my trajectory has produced. Bourdieu uses himself as an example:

... The contradictory coincidence of election into the educational aristocracy with lower-class and provincial (I would like to say: *very* provincial) origins underlay the constitution of a *cleft habitus*, generating all kinds of contradictions and tensions. (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 111)

but there are several others in his work<sup>40</sup>. However *habitus* remains distinct from a person’s personality – ‘the personal stamp marking all the products of the same *habitus*’ (1990a, p. 60) in which Bourdieu as a sociologist disavows any interest. Thus, it is intelligible to distinguish my *habitus* as a search professional (with a particular commercial and socio-educational trajectory) from my nascent *habitus* as a researcher, because the matching fields are clear: but I could not speak of my *habitus qua* myself<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> For example the ‘two scientific *habitus*’ of Nobel prize-winners Pierre-Gilles de Gennes and Claude Cohen-Tannoudji (ibid., p. 43) or a characterisation of Martin Heidegger’s *habitus* as a ‘professor ordinarius’ from ‘the lesser rural petty bourgeoisie’ (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, & Passeron, 1991, p. 47).

<sup>41</sup> I believe Bourdieu regarded this distinction as important but some interpreters might consider it too fussy, for example Näslund (2009, pp. 238-240).

#### 5.4.4 Working with *habitus*: Zelda's interview

Section 5.3.1 identified Zelda's interview as an obvious point of entry into the narrative. I interpret the interview almost oppositely to my colleagues, and I misread how they are reading it. In both cases my professional skill is on the line. To build the connection with Project Three I will begin by making sense of this incident in the language of skill and expertise, and then explore the shift to *habitus*.

In the interview itself, noticing that I and others appeared to be foreclosing on a judgement, I kept my bodily engagement and attentiveness to Zelda high while searching rapidly for an improvisation in my questioning. I wanted to stay within the discipline of allocated themes. It remained important to let her show that her leadership experience was richer than twenty years at one institution might suggest. But now I also wanted to give her a good chance of surprising me with her intellectual grasp. This felt like a challenge requiring a middling level of skill.

From the moment I closed the door behind her until the second interviewing day, it was a different story. How best to engage with Bryan and my other panel colleagues stretched my expertise to the limit. I read their body language as expressing a double satisfaction: that they agreed with each other was appealing, and that they had seen someone who could make the Trust richer was no less appealing. Bryan's leadership in expressing these sentiments gave me no way of challenging this consensus without challenging him directly. However dressed up, my challenge could also easily be read as suggesting my fellow panellists lacked intelligence (by my lights they missed Zelda's lack of intelligence). This felt a scary, high-wire improvisation.

Involved, intuitive expertise as proposed by Dreyfus & Dreyfus (1986, pp. 21-41) still describes these variations of skill better than the competency framework dominant in my practice (Project Three, section 4.3.3). At the high end something is going on which is fast, dependent on much experience and non-calculative.

Bourdieu's account is also good. As quoted on page 105, the player 'reads' the situation and *already*, non-calculatively, 'sees' according to her experience how the situation may develop. What I 'saw' through experience was that the window of opportunity to get my colleagues to re-think their perception was tiny. Zelda's was the last interview of the day, yet Bryan would want to move on within a very few

minutes; had I paraded too much data – what I did when less experienced - my intervention (I believed) would backfire.

But prominent in the episode in focus is something which Bourdieu's framework encompasses and Dreyfus' does not: conflict and challenge. After Zelda's interview I challenge the panel (who then challenge me); in the interview I try to elicit data to challenge my own emerging view. Challenge is central to the whole incident.

In Dreyfus & Dreyfus this theme is painted out. Possible conflict is recast in a scientific mode as the non-conformance of an environment with an agent's predictions. This is so even when they describe a fighter pilot in combat. The pilot expected his opponent to be an expert but the latter's manoeuvres foxed him. Then he realised they were those of a beginner. 'From then on, seeing the situation in terms of his experience with beginners, he easily won.' (1986, p. 39) This is someone shooting to kill.

By contrast fields are intrinsically sites of struggle and conflict. Bourdieu expresses this through the concept of symbolic power or capital.

## **5.5 Fields as sites of struggle: Curtis' intervention**

### **5.5.1 Symbolic capital**

Different positions in fields offer different possibilities for action. This differing scope Bourdieu calls symbolic power or capital (sometimes symbolic violence) (1991a, pp. 167-170). Again, we can introduce the concept through the example of language.

The 'common sense' of a language is not the same for all its speakers. Instead every field – not simply that of speech -

... is a *space of relations* which is just as real as a geographical space, in which movements have to be paid for by labour, by effort and especially by time (to move upwards is to raise oneself, to climb and to bear the traces or the stigmata of that effort). (Ibid., p. 232)

Bourdieu notes a newspaper report of how moved an audience in Béarn, provincial south-west France<sup>42</sup>, was when the mayor of Pau honoured a local poet by speaking in Béarnais (the mother tongue of mayor and audience) (ibid., pp. 67-69). The mayor's standing with them (his symbolic capital, his capacity to act in future situations) rose, because he defied the national convention to use French. Bourdieu further notes these symbolic profits were only possible because the mayor was a professor from a large town, putting beyond question his ability to speak immaculate French. The same language act attempted by a Béarnais lacking a commensurate position in the field would (Bourdieu claims) have had quite different consequences.

Section 5.3.1 noted Curtis' surprising intervention against Xavier. For some days I struggled with its meaning. It surprised by combining high stakes (the threat of resignation) with no attempt, as the conversation progressed, to offer supporting evidence. The idea of symbolic capital helped my understanding. Curtis strikes a particular kind of blow against a candidacy: a downward blow, a gesture made from a superior position, from a position in the field from which one is qualified to assert that 'everything' Xavier has done in recent years is wrong. If this is right, Curtis *must not* support his claims with evidence: only this absence asserts the superior position he wishes to claim, and offers the symbolic profits for which he hopes.

Curtis' move could have fallen flat but it does not. There is laughter and support. The trivial evidential level is reinforced by another trustee: 'He [Xavier] hides behind pillars. Behind his spectacles.' But the move comes unstuck in week 14. Curtis' bluff is called. Now he cannot use the same words again with anything like the same effect. Some months afterwards Bryan has certainly not forgotten the episode (he tells me, with a tinge of disappointment, that Curtis has not resigned)<sup>43</sup>.

My charging an expert daily rate or producing an apparently professional checklist are interpretable in the same way as moves to increase my symbolic capital. Importantly, the symbolic profits sought in all these moves are social, dependent on

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<sup>42</sup> Bourdieu described his own origins as 'very provincial' (on page 122).

<sup>43</sup> I am struck how the preceding two paragraphs repeat the duet of voices which I described in section 3.2: the scientist – the repeated use of the word 'evidence' – and the cynic – his 'bluff is called'.

the response of the field. So fields are sites of social struggle, but about what? This is the last element in Bourdieu's analysis of practice.

### 5.5.2 *Illusio*

Every social field, whether the scientific field, the artistic field, the bureaucratic field, or the political field, tends to require those entering it to have the relationship to the field that I call *illusio*. They may want to overturn the relations of force within the field, but, for that very reason, they grant recognition to the stakes, they are not indifferent. (Bourdieu, 1998a, p. 78)

*Illusio* is the relationship of agents to their activity in fields which matter to them. It is a relationship of involvement, of engrossment or investment, of finding what happens in the activity significant. *Habitus* discriminates what is noticed and proffers possible actions: *illusio* is the appetite to play the game. We notice the other side of *illusio*'s coin when we experience how a game makes no sense from the outside:

When you read, in Saint-Simon, about the quarrel of hats (who should bow first), if you were not born in a court society, if you do not possess the *habitus* of a person of the court, if the structures of the game are not also in your mind, the quarrel will seem futile and ridiculous to you. If, on the other hand, your mind is structured according to the structures of the world in which you play, everything will seem obvious and the question of knowing if the game is 'worth the candle' will not even be asked. ... *Illusio* is the enchanted relation to a game that is the product of an ontological complicity between mental structures and the objective structures of social space. (Ibid., p. 77)

With the framework fully in place, we can take the following steps. Firstly, to use a short further narrative to deepen our exploration of *habitus* and of movement between fields (section 5.6). Next, to take our framework further with the help of critiques of Bourdieu by other thinkers (section 5.7). And finally, to attempt to move beyond my stuck encounter of scientist and cynic by sketching an account of senior selection interviewing as a radically social practice (section 5.8).

## 5.6 Moving between fields: a short further narrative

Exploring Zelda's interview (section 5.4.4) suggested that Bourdieu's *habitus* might be more fruitful than the dominant conceptual framework (transferable skills) for

addressing the decisions to be made in senior selection interviews. Section 5.4.2 also claimed that movement between fields is fundamental to this practice. While the dilemma posed by Yves' candidacy is important in the selection process until its final hours, he is not chosen. Can we, then, explore movement between fields with some other narrative?

This project itself is part of such a move: my transition from expert interviewer to a novice researcher. In its early versions the project took a different direction. This is what happened (as in section 5.2 I shall use the present tense).

I am very excited to have the opportunity of exploring the live recruitment of a chief executive, and a theme which emerges early is disrespect. I first wrote to my learning set about feeling a 'faint twinge' of disrespect shortly after meeting the board for the first time in week 1. A combination of things – a posh London club setting, gossip between board members about 'boogieing with the Queen', my shaking everyone's hand while no-one comes forward to shake mine – together with the attention which Bourdieu pays to questions of social and professional trajectory prompted me to write:

I ponder my own starting point in this social space. This seems to me being half-Chinese (lowish status), fundamentally a headhunter (very low status), Cambridge first and Harvard (high status), two years at the end of secondary school at St Paul's in London – high intellectual status but no more than middling social status.

But what puts some muscle behind the theme is Curtis' treatment of Xavier. I begin to think about the costliness of understanding strangers. I begin to think this involves not only time but the risk of change to one's own identity, and start to formulate disrespect as the *ex ante* judgement that someone is not worth understanding. I have never read about disrespect in connection with selection processes but now I can see it as endemic in my professional activity. I make connections to the low status of human resource professionals noted in Khurana's research (2002); also Elias and Scotson's classic (1994) on the arrival of strangers in a 1960s English suburb (associating with strangers is status-reducing); also the work on disrespect of the Frankfurt philosopher Axel Honneth (1995) (2007).

It is thrilling to find by reflection on experience unexpected insights from wider literature into decades of my working life. I feel motivated and competent in my research. I am ski-ing on virgin snow. All of us in the learning set know that doctoral work needs to be original: originality starts to seem possible.

After a few weeks I circulate some material and am strongly challenged by my supervisor. He asserts: 'You will not be able to defend this as research'. He reminds me of the need not simply to situate my work in literature, but in conflicts or tensions of difference; I am making connections all over the place but not working with difference. Now I remember this point had also been important in Project Three, but I overlooked it. For a while I lose understanding of what I am doing. What do I think research is? Is conflict and challenge essential to it?

What has happened in this narrative? In the Dreyfus model, the beginner uses 'context-free rules'; this description fits poorly. Indeed the Dreyfus model implies that a sufficiently self-aware actor can (by observing how rule-dependent her actions are) know her own level of expertise. By contrast an account in terms of an under-developed research *habitus* fits my misplaced confidence well. The sense of virgin snow as I race off - the lack of cross-cutting, conflicting tracks in my reading - excites me, assuaging my anxieties about originality. This is emotionally mistaken perception: learning from Project Three I should have been fearful. I needed to walk, not race, close to the cross-cutting tracks of others. The learning was not forgotten; once prompted I recalled it and its importance immediately. But it was too weakly inscribed in my deeply ingrained *habitus*<sup>44</sup> as an interviewer, to whom fast leaps in the compressed time of an interview have become second nature.

In an unfamiliar field, I presented my half banknote. I swung dramatically between misplaced, intuitive confidence and a collapse of understanding. For a while I felt bruised. Motivation was tested. Only as the new field starts to write itself in my flesh do I begin to find out whether I have the appetite for the new game: are its stakes

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<sup>44</sup>Being etched in the body, *habitus* has 'its specific inertia, its hysteresis' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 130).



really worth the cost? *Illusio* foregrounds this question which frameworks of skill or competence treat reductively (as rational choices or responses to stimuli: see the ‘arousal’ of motivation in Project Three, section 4.3.3).

Symbolic capital also fits. Like the production of the recruitment checklist, the pursuit of a doctorate is readily interpretable as an attempt to increase power, as is my supervisor’s intervention (his influence over my work increases, he demonstrates that he is worth paying). But there are two problems with this.

Firstly, these interpretations of symbolic capital are recognisably the cynic’s. They do not accommodate my palpable sense of some professional, other-directed, unselfish element within both the narratives. In particular, interpreting my supervisor’s action as mainly selfish feels outlandish. Is Bourdieu’s world cynical? Does it allow for unselfishness? Will symbolic capital help me move my stuck dialogue (section 5.3.2)?

Secondly, is the ease of fit itself suspicious? Suppose instead of pursuing my doctorate I abandon it: am I now pursuing some other capital (such as money, time or standing among sceptical business colleagues)? Had my supervisor not challenged me, or had I gone along with the panel’s initial assessment of Zelda: would he or I have been ‘protecting relational capital (goodwill)’? Is Bourdieu’s symbolic capital a *virtus dormitiva*<sup>45</sup>?

## **5.7 Dreyfus and Sayer: misrecognition and disinterested practice**

### **5.7.1 The critical landscape**

These two questions are precisely those levelled against Bourdieu by (Hubert) Dreyfus (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1993) and Sayer (1999). Does Bourdieu explain too much (and so explain nothing) or does he explain too little (because he cannot explain unselfishness)? I will focus on these questions but first note how much wider the critical landscape is (Calhoun, LiPuma, & Postone, 1993) (Shusterman, 1999).

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<sup>45</sup> Quoted by Nietzsche from Molière (Nietzsche, 1989, p. 19). Opium induces sleep because it contains a ‘sleep-inducing principle’.

That landscape includes large tracts of philosophical discourse. Since I interpret Bourdieu not as reconstructing an aspect of life called ‘practice’, but as reconstructing the human world through practice, his sociological tanks are parked on philosophy’s lawn (Callewaert, 2006).

Dreyfus (himself a philosopher) states:

Pierre Bourdieu has developed one of the most analytically powerful and heuristically promising approaches to human reality on the current scene. As opposed to the other two plausible living contenders, Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, Bourdieu has continued and enriched the line of modern thought that runs from Durkheim and Weber through Heidegger to Merleau-Ponty and Foucault. (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1993, p. 35)

On a smaller scale, one critique which for lack of space I am not pursuing is that of feminist thinkers such as Butler (1999), Kraus (1993) and McNay (1999). I referenced gender in Project Two (section 3.8) and the work of career advice which I have taken up (Project Three) raises questions of identity. The thinkers I have cited are attracted by Bourdieu’s emphasis on embodied agency, and the durability as well as changeability of *habitus* as a resource for better understanding gendered identities<sup>46</sup>. For Butler Bourdieu’s framework underestimates agents’ scope to make radical change, while McNay see this as a realistic consequence of embodiment. But I cannot do justice to their arguments here.

### **5.7.2 Misrecognition**

Before asking whether Bourdieu explains too much or too little, both Dreyfus and Sayer raise a prior objection. They point out that he draws from his own framework the claim that agents are misled about their own action. This means, say Dreyfus and Sayer, agents are (contrary to Bourdieu’s intention) robbed of any meaning. Dreyfus (with Rabinow) argues:

... [Bourdieu] necessarily denies the validity of the manifold significances of the practices to the practitioners. Behind these

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<sup>46</sup> Later addressed specifically by Bourdieu (2001).  
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experiences he finds the explanatory reality – the meaning of human being (maximizing symbolic capital) – which structures the social field embodied in the *habitus*. But in a theory of human being, unlike a theory of nature, the theory must account for why the practitioners are deluded and why the scientist is not. (1993, p. 41)

In other words, if everyone misunderstands what they are doing, so must scientists and so must Bourdieu. Sayer puts the same point with wry elegance:

As an admirer of the work of Pierre Bourdieu I sometimes wonder why I appreciate it. Is it because of my *habitus* – those deeply engrained dispositions towards other people, objects and practices in the social field, which orient what I think and do? Am I just swayed by Bourdieu's educational capital? Is my appreciation actually an unconscious strategy of distinction, a way of ingratiating myself with academic colleagues? (Sayer, 1999, pp. 403-404)

The inference of Bourdieu's to which they refer is that practice entails 'misrecognition' (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 105). The truth of a practice cannot be grasped from the outside, by an observer for whom the stakes in the game do not matter. If the stakes in the game do not engage you, you cannot understand them. In this way the detached scientist is fated to misrecognise what she observes. But if you become a player – if you acquire the *habitus* of that field - then you also misrecognise your practice. The price of becoming a player is that the stakes of the field are inscribed in your *habitus*; the price of that inscription is an intuitive 'obviousness' of what the practice is about. The obviousness is the product of a matching *habitus* and field.

I argue that what misrecognition entails is that no agent can command the whole truth of her practice: there is always something more to be said (social science tries to construct this). It *may* be, as in Bourdieu's interpretation of the Béarnais, that the missing understanding so undercuts the agent's own understanding that one might say such an agent is in the grip of an illusion, or fooled. But the *necessary* burden of misrecognition is that the agent's understanding is incomplete, not negated. Hence Bourdieu insists that the 'somewhat disenchanting' nature of the gaze which he seeks in research is 'not sniggering or cynical' (1998a, p. 75).

But are we still caught in the trap? Bourdieu *says* his research gaze is not ‘cynical’ – but he also says that all of us misrecognise our own work (so he must misrecognise his own). In what sense is knowledge possible in a Bourdieusian world?

### 5.7.3 Science and social science

Science (meaning the physical sciences) is a human game whose impact is hard to exaggerate. Its success springs from our experience that at scales intermediate between the subatomic and the cosmic the universe behaves like a single objectivity, subject to universal laws. The paramount stake in this game is more fully discovering this objectivity. For Bourdieu this is a misrecognition, because scientists’ ‘truths’ are necessarily products of a social game – but an unusually potent one:

[I reject] both the naïve realist vision in which scientific discourse is a direct reflection of reality, a pure recording, and the relativist-constructivist vision, in which scientific discourse is the product of a construction, oriented by interests and cognitive structures, which produces multiple visions of the world, underdetermined by that world .... Science is *a construction which brings out a discovery* ... .(Bourdieu, 2004, pp. 76-77)

Several attributes of the scientific field interlock to account for its potency (ibid., pp. 47-54 and 62-84).

- (a) For diverse reasons (not least the complexity of mathematics) science has evolved relatively high autonomy from games with other stakes, so that its rules (such as experimental rigour) are more consistently and vigorously applied than those of more corruptible fields.
- (b) Its stakes and the rewards of fame in the field motivate scientists to exceptional vigilance and challenge of each other’s work, searching for error.
- (c) The stability of the physical world enables increasingly accurate and valuable predictions, which attracts more (and more talented) people to play the game.

Science's autonomy is neither perfect nor fixed. It was won with some permanence from religion but with continuing encroachment from politics and business (for example not reporting adverse experimental results in the pharmaceutical industry). But overall, the autonomy of science from both politics and business is manifestly greater than that of social science, which is vulnerable also to the hegemony of science itself (ibid., pp. 85-88 and 100-109).

Bourdieu, like Elias (1978; 1987) and many other social scientists such as Flyvbjerg (2001) see that social science lacks the protection of (a). Taking self-aware humanity as its quarry, it lacks also the apparently stable foundations of (c). Thus social science is even more dependent upon the dynamic of conflict and challenge within its own field<sup>47</sup>:

The fact that [in science] producers tend to have as their clients only their most rigorous and vigorous competitors, the most competent and the most critical, those therefore most *inclined* and most *able* to give their critique full force, is for me the *Archimedean point* on which one can stand to *give a scientific account of scientific reason*, to rescue scientific reason from relativistic reduction and explain how science can constantly progress towards more rationality without having to appeal to some kind of founding miracle. (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 54)

Contrary to Bourdieu's intentions, do *illusio* or misrecognition wreck agency by turning all agents (including scientists and social scientists) into fools? To repeat, misrecognition is the incompleteness, not the necessary reversal, of the agent's self-understanding. A physical scientist may well believe she is directly discovering a physical universe: this is a misrecognition *but nevertheless, because of the nature of the scientific game, she makes real discoveries*. In the case of social science, and therefore in the case of himself, misrecognition must also apply (and with worse consequences). Bourdieu argues in response for the social sciences to adopt a strong discipline of reflexivity, to keep chipping away at the unknown remainder (2004, pp. 85-114). Knowledge in social science is necessarily more time-bound and insecure than science, but for Bourdieu there is still better (more objective) social science thinking and worse.

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<sup>47</sup> Accordingly I concluded that my supervisor (on page 128) was correct.  
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#### 5.7.4 A selfish world vs disinterested practice

We can now return to the contrasting arguments that Bourdieu explains too much and too little. The first argument is:

Everything from accumulating monetary capital to praise for being burned at the stake automatically counts as symbolic capital. To say that whatever people do they do for social profit does not tell us anything if profit is defined as whatever people pursue in a given society. (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1993, p. 42)

But symbolic capital cannot explain everything. It has a radically social grammar, which can form some kinds of explanation but not others. Symbolic capital cannot explain an atomic world, such as one of private goods in which I am attracted only to starlight, you to plainsong and she to whole numbers divisible by 3.

Sayer's contrary suggestion<sup>48</sup> is that there is disinterested action and Bourdieu's world is too flat, amoral and economistic, too similar to rational choice theory, to explain it. Sayer regards moral stances as inescapably part of life. He sees them present but unacknowledged in Bourdieu's work – for example when Bourdieu labels situations as 'domination' (Sayer, 1999, pp. 404, 407, 426). Sayer (ibid., p. 411) cites Bourdieu's exposure of class bias in tutors' comments on students' work in 'The State Nobility' (Bourdieu, 1996). If Bourdieu makes no moral judgement, Sayer asks, why should he care? And can assessments be biased without granting the possibility of unbiased – disinterested – assessment?

Bourdieu strongly differentiates his position from rational choice theory in lectures given in 1988 - in English 'Is a Disinterested Act Possible?' (1998a). Important disinterested practices can and do develop, such as today a parent, a judge, a scientist, a bodyguard or a suicide bomber. The content and purity of disinterestedness varies over place and time according to the content of the principles

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<sup>48</sup> Sayer also fails to grasp radical sociality, as in his (to my mind forlorn) project to distinguish the 'intrinsic' value of an elite education from its reputational and network advantages: the intrinsic value of the classroom experience is affected by the calibre and breadth of your class-mates, which is the school's social cachet made flesh (1999, p. 422). However I grant Sayer that if the making of value judgements is intrinsic to human meaning-making – a view to which following Taylor (1989, p. 31) I am inclined – then the necessity (as opposed to the possibility) of such judgements is not apparent from Bourdieu's framework.

embodied in each specific game, and contingent factors (already discussed in the case of science) which shape how vigorously transgressions of those principles become unthinkable in the flesh of those who play.

Again, misrecognition is necessary incompleteness, not necessary negation or cynicism. Suppose last year I took vows as selfless as you please; I also joined a monastic order which studies such vows and punishes infractions severely. Today I express those vows in an act as unreserved and unselfish as Sayer can conceive. Misrecognition does not render my act greedy: it exposes that there will always be something more to say. That ‘something more’ could be like the ‘sculpture found at the Auch cathedral, in the Gers, which represents two monks struggling over the prior’s staff’ (ibid., p. 78); or something which shows my act to have been even more selfless than hitherto imagined. In Bourdieu’s world action is fated to be complex but not to lack generosity or virtue.

### **5.7.5 Implications for this research**

The wide discussion in this section has substantial implications for my inquiry.

Firstly: the inaptness of science as the model for the human study of human activity. Yet, science’s intellectual hegemony in the *habitus* of modernity, compounded by a narrow reliance in thinking about interviewing on behavioural psychology and the stance of ‘measurement’, have given my practice the underlying assumptions of science. If human activity is reflexive and social, then help is more likely to come from thinkers who have taken up not only the theme of science-inappropriateness but also power and exclusion.

Secondly, Bourdieu is one such, but not alone. Since I am taking a *radically* social view, his relevance is increased. I have also argued that his interpretation of *habitus* is more promising than Elias’ in helping us think adequately about movement between fields. I shall argue in section 5.8 that his idea of a disinterested practice – a practice like research itself - is also valuable.

Thirdly, I am not putting forward disinterested practice simply as an interesting *idea*. Experiencing in this research a challenging framework for judgement which I have come to recognise as durable and worthy of respect, but no part of which is beyond challenge or metaphysically out of reach, has been vital. I have encountered in the flesh (as in section 5.6) a possible answer to the question posed twice in the Introduction: if science goes out the window, is every opinion or judgement no better than any other?

Fourthly, along with the other participants in my practice (including clients and candidates) I must misrecognise my contribution. The greater my expertise, the more profound the match between *habitus* and field, the more difficult my task of noticing something which obviousness has made ‘practically’ invisible. This is a major challenge, but if it can be overcome I can glimpse the possibility of a discourse beyond that of the scientist and the cynic. This section has separated Bourdieu’s stance from both of these.

The last point raises a question of method. Neither detached observation nor engrossed participation can escape misrecognition. An agent’s theorisations after the event will be even less help:

... There is every reason to think that as soon as he reflects on his practice, adopting a quasi-theoretical posture, the agent loses any chance of expressing the truth of his practice. ... Academic interrogation inclines him to take up a point of view on his own practice that is no longer that of action, without being that of science ... . (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 91)

But if, rather than theorising, my body has absorbed something of the *habitus* of research then in carrying out *that* practice I might notice something of research value – something worth discussing.

## **5.8 Sketching a radically social practice**

My argument concerns thinking *about* interviewing as a practice and thinking *within* the practice about candidates. I contend that in both cases thinking in the form of vigilant and challenging conversation, grounded in experience and borrowing the intellectual compass of the humanities, can unstick a discourse and a practice



presently captured by science. I have built on Bourdieu's thought both to make my argument and to construct an offering into such a conversation. To the latter end I offer this first sketch of senior selection interviewing as a radically social practice: in other words, my attempt based on this project to move beyond the scientist and the cynic.

The task of this research is to notice something elusive. I offer three possibilities.

Firstly, the re-thinking of transferable skills, expertise and movement between fields in terms of *habitus* leads to *much heightened* anxiety and sense of the unknown when an organisation appoints to a senior role. It is profoundly unclear what happens when someone presents half a banknote in a foreign country. The difficulty in this noticing is fear of two kinds – that at the beginning of section 5.2.1 but now redoubled and a professional crisis (and fear of power loss) for me as a practitioner. The risks for both organisation and supposed expert are existential.

Secondly, we can take one more step with the Béarnais example of misrecognition (on page 125). For Bourdieu careful attention to necessary conditions shows that, even if the participants think their defiance undercuts the dominance of French, they are in fact enacting that dominance – reproducing it socially. From this an important clue to my practice lies in Curtis' rhetorical coup. It would have failed to yield his desired (but temporary) symbolic profits had he not flagrantly defied the unspoken supposition that claims should be supported by evidence. But for that reason his defiance enacts and reproduces the significance of what is defied. If an opponent of religion spits in a font she attacks its significance yet reproduces it; hers is a particular act of consecration. May professional elements of my practice – for example the checklist – do unnoticed work even in the course of being defied? Here the difficulty in noticing lies in reversing an understanding which is embedded in the practice as obvious.

Finally, I have emphasised the bodily nature of knowing. For example cutting out narrative material and hard-won potential insights from earlier versions of this project has been painful. At each stage (the present version is the eighth) I have

vigorously but not wholly articulately resisted reducing the narrative to a collection of incidents (such as Zelda's interview). Is there something still to notice about the narrative's larger shape?

Possibly this: its felt familiarity. This familiarity goes unremarked *whether you experience it or not*. The *habitus* of someone familiar with senior selection processes makes the familiarity obvious, it goes without saying; while those unfamiliar will not see any familiarity about which to speak.

Patterns of interviewing at senior levels differ but in my experience they are both few (crudely, panel interviews in public sector organisations and one-to-one interviews in private ones) and difficult to change (I have tried). Perhaps what I need to notice is how the very familiarity and repetitiveness of 'ordinary' steps (eg there is a person specification or checklist, there is a shortlisting meeting and it is followed by ...) helps the participants create and experience 'felt familiarity' as they step into the unknown.

This unknown I have now described in newly-alarmed, existential terms. The idea of 'transferable skills' reduces fear. So does the felt familiarity of a process. The various professional elements of the practice (such as the checklist) do not *only* do 'what it says on the tin': they combine (I am suggesting) in a pattern which enables the participants to experience 'knowing what to do', and feeling that they so know and can act. As the process develops, the participants take many small steps and occasional large ones into the unknown. But I characterised intuition in Project Three in these exact terms. The practice of senior selection interviewing helps its participants act into an abyss while experiencing many of their actions and choices as intuitive or obvious. (Indeed the logic of practice is that this experience is a necessary condition for meaningful choice within the urgent time-span of action.)

Of course this familiarity is not equal for all people. Reduced to its details (ie a panel member who knows that there *should* be a checklist versus one who does not), this differential familiarity identifies those used to senior appointments from those less used. The patterns of power and exclusion thus contour relations among panel

members and between them and others, as well as creating and limiting<sup>49</sup> the roles of search consultants and expert advisers.

To summarise, the role played in the practice of senior selection interviewing by an undergirding concept of professionalism, or betterment, or objectivity – a sense which currently mainly comes from ideas of science or measurement – I will characterise as a *weak ethical gravity*. Created by the participants and the histories inscribed in the *habitus* and field out of which they act, it orients social space. Without constraining the participants much, it grants them a taken-for-granted ‘up’ and ‘down’ which enables joint action into an unknown of more than usual danger. In the narrative this ‘weak ethical gravity’ is represented not only by a number of my interventions but my presence at all (the idea that an expert is worth paying). Another way of saying this is to describe senior selection interviewing as a disinterested practice with very weak autonomy or capacity to resist corruption.

What I misrecognized previously was that the contribution of this orienting effect by no means lies necessarily in the participants agreeing to move in the direction in which I vigorously try to point (cf Zelda), or even in some hypothetical ‘confidence effect’ whereby my confidence in acting into the unknown spreads to my clients. The fact that there is an ‘up’ and a ‘down’, even if we do not care precisely which directions these are or flagrantly go in other directions, helps us act together. The question asked twice in the Introduction (if science goes the window is every opinion or judgement no better than any other?) points to a deep fear of directionless disorientation.

The presence or absence and the nature of a weak ethical gravity in this practice touches many people. It extends to practice participants in the widest sense: everyone who decides to apply for senior roles, or who considers applying but decides against. It extends to those over whom the appointees will have authority (the concerned staff who I met at the start of the project).

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<sup>49</sup> My perception of a ‘tiny window’ on page 113 available to me to influence my client’s assessment of Zelda demonstrates the limiting effect.

The idea of no ethical gravity at all would have wider repercussions still. Our society is partly defined by its complex interlocking fields and concerns about the differing kinds of access individuals should have to differing roles. This strand of thought, often expressed as meritocracy, goes back at least as far as the Weberian idea of bureaucracy. A review of these ideas and concerns is offered by Walzer, who argues for the wide applicability of a meritocratic understanding of ‘office’ as part of the contemporary philosophical understanding of justice (1983, pp. 129-164):

... An office is any position in which the political community as a whole takes an interest, choosing the person who holds it or regulating the procedures by which he is chosen. Control over appointments is crucial. (Ibid., p. 129)

Of course, it cannot be inferred that the ethical gravity in interviewing needs to point in any particular direction – that it must exclude nepotism or gender discrimination, for example. Those are contingent, socially contestable matters.

To continue sketching this practice: if the suggestion of felt familiarity has merit, then change is likely to be slow. Moreover, any ethical patterning within the practice will remain weak – far weaker than science but also markedly weaker than social science. This flows from what makes this field what it is.

Taking up the arguments about social science versus science in section 5.7.3, senior selection interviewing partakes in all the weaknesses of autonomy which characterise social science, and then some: not merely the powerful stakes of politics and business, but also all those stakes - such as those of specialisms versus management in the Simon Trust, or quantitative versus qualitative research in academic appointments (Bozionelos, 2005) - which matter in the fields in which specific appointments lie. Senior appointments mean intensified stakes: by its nature the practice of senior selection interviewing straddles these different fields and is exposed to them all.

A powerful engine of change can be professional interests seeking the symbolic and material profits which derive from the cause they advocate, such as jurists and bureaucrats in the case of the modern, universal, meritocratic State:

The profit of universalization is undoubtedly one of the historical engines of the progress of the universal. (Bourdieu, 1998b, p. 60)

But there is little sign that the professionals already established (in many cases with significant material profits) in my field see much reason for change. Indeed the management of potential embarrassment which Khurana sees as central to the executive search industry is, arguably, antithetical to the cultivation of conflict and challenge for which I am arguing (2002, pp. 128-134, 142-150).

Finally, selection interviewing is hampered in its development as a practice by several opacities. Curtained by confidentiality, the practice trails in front of clients, candidates and professionals alike numerous temptations to make uncorroborated or inflated claims. Then there is an opacity between client and adviser which makes it difficult for the wider professional field to hold the adviser accountable for the quality of her work in any particular case (contrast architects and buildings with search professionals and major appointments). Moreover, for reasons now developed over two projects, the expert and the novice interviewer alike will probably experience many of their judgements as intuitive, with the opacity which this implies in terms of vigilant reasoned discourse.

Yet *very weak* as this ethical gravity or disinterested practice may be, according to this project it is essential, and so it has influence. In the Synopsis I review the work done in all four projects before asking where this leaves *the* practice and *my* practice.

## Appendix to Project Four – Simon Trust interview checklist

CANDIDATE		√√, √, ?, X	COMMENTS
DRIVES AND VALUES	Energy, ambition, persistence		
	Importance of P and Q <sup>50</sup> in society (nature of excellence, regional commitment)		
TRACK RECORD	Organisational and financial management		
	Leadership of innovation		
	Sufficient <sup>51</sup> experience across more than one of: P; Q; marketing; influencing government		
SKILLS (STRENGTHS <sup>52</sup> )	Sensitive, tactful, persuasive with a wide range of people		
	Speaking to small and large groups		
SKILLS (BALANCED <sup>53</sup> )	<i>Decision-making</i> Imagination                      focus risk-taking                      (vs)                      discipline		
	<i>Managing staff</i> Personal touch                      results motivating                      (vs)                      firmness flexible                      fair, consistent		
	<i>Trustee relations</i> Will take direction from (vs) the board                      can lead, motivate, use trustees		

All ten attributes are important but the (suggested) highest priority five are shaded.

<sup>50</sup> P and Q refer to the two main fields within which the Simon Trust works. The fields are large (each with several types of sub-specialist expert).

<sup>51</sup> ‘Sufficient’: how likely to be effective across all the areas, and accomplished in some, within 1 year?

<sup>52</sup> More is good (cf ‘balanced’ below).

<sup>53</sup> A skilled balance of opposites/complements is required.

## Chapter Six: Synopsis

### 6.1 Argument

The central questions which have emerged in this research are: Is the practice of senior selection interviewing stuck? and If so, can a different theorisation of the activity contribute to fresh action and understanding?

A summary of the response this research offers should begin by noting that research into selection at or near board level is limited – Fletcher (2005), Khurana (2002), Russell (1990). However this research confirms, as does my own experience, that at senior levels interviewing is the dominant selection tool. By contrast the research into selection interviewing at junior and middle levels is plentiful. Overwhelmingly it follows the scientific (typically psychological) idea of the measurement of skills which belong to individuals and are transferable with them. In particular senior selection has not been studied as a product of radically social human agency – ie agency not reducible to the interactions of autonomous individuals making free choices or following habits. This is unsurprising, since thinking atomically is part of today's common sense.

The scientific and as-if-scientific measurement of discrete individuals dominates not only theory but also selection practice, through the tools, concepts and discussions taken for granted in it - such as the person specification annexed to Project Four. What consequences does this have for an activity in which humans are intensely concerned with judging other humans, and in which high stakes in terms of power, status and money are common?

This research argues that the consequences are damaging. Scientific research is valuable in its own terms. It has also helped move many organisations beyond the situation of the Broadway Manufacturing Company which Boyatzis studied, where the only detectable difference between those who were promoted farthest over 20 years and their counterparts was height. But the natural sciences' inadvertent intellectual hegemony cuts the practice off from a wealth of other scholarship – including the very arguments made in the social sciences and philosophy about the

inappropriateness of mimicking the natural sciences in social studies. I have developed this argument drawing particularly on the work of Bourdieu (2004; 1990a), but it is made by many other writers, for example Flyvbjerg (2001). At its simplest, the self-awareness of human beings means that significant acts of understanding human activity change significantly that which was understood.

This thesis has demonstrated more specific damage from an overly narrow theorisation of selection interviewing. Intuitions are common experiences for interviewers, yet best practice in interviewing does not draw the distinctions between expert intuition and first-impression heuristics identified in mainstream management studies. Competencies (Boyatzis, 1982) (Wood & Payne, 1998) and transferable skills are relied on as the intellectual and practical bedrock of contemporary human resource management, usually in ignorance of arguments and evidence about the contextual nature of expert knowledge (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986). These points have implications for practitioners even without any more radical reframing of these themes.

While focussing on sociology, examples have been given of the wealth of wider thinking relevant to choosing leaders, including critical theory (and feminist thinking) and philosophy – thinkers on power such as Arendt (2000a) or Foucault (1986), on disrespect such as Honneth (2007) or on justice in a plural society such as Walzer (1983).

The argument then takes two further steps. Firstly, this scientific dominance is contributing to a stuck practice. The best practices and tools for improvement offered to selection interviewers make transparency a foundational step – all the issues concerning the role to be filled should be made explicit and, so far as possible, resolved. However, drawing on arguments which challenge dominant thinking about leadership (Griffin, 2002)(Stacey 2010), this research argues that senior roles are intrinsically political and incapable of being rendered fully transparent: indeed current interviewing best practice self-certifies its incompetence in matters of power. I explore the stuckness of my own practice, caught in a ‘dialogue of the deaf’



between scientist and cynic; a wider stuckness is suggested by how the practice remains dominated by interviewing with little innovation in techniques.

Secondly, a contribution is offered to the more multi-faceted discourse for which this research calls. Working with Bourdieu's logic of practice raises the reflexive question, how do I misrecognize my own contribution to the practice? Trying to move beyond the scientific objectivity which I now find deceptive and the unconstrained subjectivity which I find unstable and chaotic, I sketch a basis for thinking differently about what constitutes 'better' and 'worse' in senior selection interviewing. The practice produces (I suggest) a 'weak ethical gravity' as well as a common sense which allows action together into (and despite) profound uncertainty and anxiety; all this created and continually re-created in a radically social way between all the participants (expert and not, candidates and interviewers) in the practice of interviewing. This contribution will be useful if it offers new illumination of experience which stimulates fresh thought and action – ie a break with stuckness.

## **6.2 Drawing the projects together**

### **6.2.1 The world of selection interviewing**

Taken together, the four projects relate to each other in different ways. For example, one might place a decisive break at the end of Project Two. Thus Projects One and Two deal with power while Projects Three and Four deal with interviewing. The closeness of Projects One and Two is emphasised in the way my failure to empower the champions of my firm's strategic vision (Project Two, section 3.3) follows on from my working with my partner Bill on strategy-setting (Project One, section 2.3). Project Two ends (section 3.10) with a summary of the intertwining of power and silence from both projects. Project Three onwards also sees a shift in narrative emphasis from the exploration of puzzles in the past to action in the present, which is part of the shift towards discovering the puzzling in the ordinary.

Excepting the unsuccessful search to replace the difficult chief executive of a major professional association in Project One (section 2.6), the world of the professional

interviewer only confronts us in Projects Three and Four. If this world is our destination, in what kind of world do we arrive?

This research opens up an emotionally wearing world of high stakes, big gambles, fast judgements, closed doors and professionals of ambivalent status.

The stakes are high for organisations. In the Project One narrative, Patrick causes the organisation which he leads to defeat the attempts of two search firms to replace him, with these costs: considerable humiliation for an international organisation and its board; wasted fees and expenses alone likely to exceed £150,000; and significant likelihood of a makeshift ultimate appointment. The Project Four narrative takes up the aftermath of a chief executive's unexpected departure, and is sufficiently nerve-wracking for Bryan, the experienced businessman chair, to be attracted to advisory 'belt and braces' – me as well as a search firm.

The stakes are no less high for individuals: candidates reaching the pinnacle of their careers; encountering the esteem or disrespect of colleagues; or striving for the financial means to support themselves, and wondering afterwards whether too much or not enough preparation, or the wrong kind of jacket or sense of humour was to blame. I think of staff finding themselves with a new boss (perhaps one of their former peers), or board members like Curtis, a gambler who ultimately loses out in his threatened resignation over Xavier. The gamble for both organisation and candidate when a senior person, particularly a chief executive, is appointed is huge.

Let us notice time. Anxiety and organisational vulnerability are part of the reason behind the shortage of time which seems to be a taken-for-granted part of this world. But the rush might seem odd by contrast with the high stakes. My examiners may easily spend three times longer interviewing me on this thesis than many British university committees will spend interviewing a candidate for vice-chancellor – and the multiple will be much larger for the time spent digesting the paperwork. Even if fifty minutes is a wise amount of time to spend interviewing a leadership candidate, why is five or ten minutes a wise amount of time to spend distilling that interview into a judgement?

It is a world of closed doors which exclude people – of conversations in private about the ‘real’ needs of the organisation, interviews in private, decisions made in private, and doors closed in the faces of many candidates seeking appointment who will not get an interview, let alone be appointed to the role.

It is, I suggest, also a world of ambivalently regarded professionals, with a number of individuals well paid for doing a job which is not easy and whose consequences are significant, but with low status (Project Four, section 5.6).

### **6.2.2 Voice and presence in this writing**

Alternatively we can notice something different from a ‘game of two halves’ – perhaps a wave motion which gradually stabilises.

In the Introduction (section 1.2) I highlighted as particularly difficult my striving to make myself sufficiently present in the text while leaving room for another.

Impersonal, deceptive objectivity and personal, overwhelming subjectivity produce in common a text which does not have space for the reader as a person. But the terrain between these poles differs for each writer, and contains individual perils. I am reminded of this by re-reading my supervisor’s comments on the recurrence in my early drafts of ironic detachment to my own experience. Certainly I do not find this journey towards a different voice and presence one which a beginner can make on their own.

Thus in Projects One and Two my depiction of the stakes at play in my bargaining over strategy with Bill, followed by my two year attempt at empowering champions (or attempting to ‘disprove’ the accusation of being too controlling) strikes me now as muted. I tell you that these were failures of leadership in a setting to which I had not only given my heart but two central decades of my working life, and I invite you to infer the pain from the data. By contrast when I re-read the choosing of learning sets, I have a foretaste of the emotion which bursts through in Project Two in the poem ‘Naming of Parts’ and in the photograph of the bound woman (section 3.8).

Similarly with the organisational trauma inflicted by Patrick on his internationally reputed organisation in Project One (section 2.6). Apart from defeating the efforts of two search firms, Patrick caused a senior individual who had publicly resigned from his job elsewhere to unresign (practically unheard of in my experience). Again I slightly side-step and let you infer the pain. By contrast I hope the organisational anxiety involved in the chief executive search in Project Four comes to life more (section 5.2.1 – the arrival of strangers) but not so insistently as to exclude other interpretations.

Three years ago I would have interpreted this pattern in amateur psychological terms – something to do with an insecure psyche. Insecure psyches have not been abolished, but now I think it as important *as a first step* to see the pattern in terms of practised physical skill, involving my fingers as much as my mind: in the early projects I do not know how to be more present in my writing in a way which does not push you out; and *as a second step* to notice the inadequacy of skill as a descriptor compared to *habitus*.

Thus, writing is not picking each next word rationally from the Shorter Oxford Dictionary according to some measure of its expected rhetorical effects – as if writing were buying words from Amazon, whose algorithm predicts that ‘Writers like you who have bought ‘whose algorithm predicts’ often next buy ‘the future’’. The skill here would be the precision and speed of the algorithm. Nor is it, as Dreyfus & Dreyfus propose in an important advance beyond skill which nevertheless remains inadequate, an expert mind individually and intuitively (in their term *arationally*) sensing patterns of words as a result of a decade of immersion in that dictionary, like a Scrabble master with autism. Rather it is a small number of words (including some which the writer has never previously read or written<sup>54</sup>) already rising off the keyboard in my immersion with others in a game – in this case a game of research. The apparently solitary act of writing is radically social.

In Project Four I invite you to explore Curtis’ outburst against Xavier, the shock of Zelda’s interview yielding diametrically opposed views, the tension of the panel’s

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<sup>54</sup> For example ‘telic power’ at the end of section 4, Project Two.  
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final decision-making and my abortive first attempt at writing the project. By Project Four I may be more successfully finding language which offers both of us space to be. If so, this struggle in the domain of writing mirrors the struggle of this research in the domain of thought to join Bourdieu in rejecting the opposites which he labelled ‘social phenomenology’ and ‘social physics’ (1990a, p. 135).

### **6.2.3 A journey of destruction and construction: radical sociality**

For me, however, the most telling break is between Projects Three and Four. Here there is a fundamental shift in the investigative journey towards radical sociality; a journey which can be understood as a twofold path of destruction and construction.

Each of Projects One to Three contained revelatory shocks. Pillars of my taken-for-granted understanding collapsed. It was a double shock in Project One to lose, thanks to Stacey and Griffin’s analysis of systems thinking and leadership, my ethical understanding of myself as a leader. I had bathed in a warm humanitarian glow, but my treatment of colleagues and staff had been de-humanising. A shock in itself<sup>55</sup>: but a double shock to realise that bookshelves of insights from well-regarded academic sources only compounded the problem. A quotation about the efficacy of soft systems methodology particularly sticks in my throat:

Given the frame of mind outlined above, any problematical situation in human affairs may be tackled with some confidence. (Checkland & Poulter, 2006, p. 168)(Project One, section 2.8)

The first shock in Project Two was larger still. I do not until sections 3.8 and 3.9 make explicit the idea of communication as gesture-response which I am working towards – I link this to Bourdieu and Mead, pointed to by Stacey and Griffin. However this thinking underlies the collapse in section 3.4 of the signal-processing idea of communication (what I term the fundamental ambiguity of meaning). If you can understand anything which someone else is saying, then it is possible that that

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<sup>55</sup> Which took time to reach fruition. Project One was written in 2007. At the beginning of section 8 I listed the assessment of capital adequacy for banks, on which I had worked in the Treasury, as an example of the unproblematic use of systems thinking. Then we had the world’s worst financial crisis. In January 2010 I had the opportunity to give a lecture on this and took a less rosy view - <http://www.gresham.ac.uk/event.asp?PageId=45&EventId=925> (accessed 11 April 2010).

understanding is meant to deceive you. I had inhabited a world in which isolated Cartesian minds assigned meanings to symbols for their convenience, like shipwrecked dictionary-writers. I entered one in which human communication is always and necessarily a matter of shifting power relations.

In Project Two my understanding of power also changed, from something akin to physical force to something much more paradoxical, in which the insights of Elias into mutual dependence and Foucault into the politically-inflected nature of truth-telling (and silence) were significant. However the resolution of my narrative – why had I failed to empower energetic colleagues despite *walking my talk* for two years? – did not come until Arendt distinguished violence from the power of creative social action. In my narrative I had demanded creative social action at the point of a managerial gun. Arendt suggested that this might be doomed to fail. The thinkers about power whom I classified as atomic (Dahl and Lukes) did not.

In Project Two I see now an unconscious hint of the central theme of Project Three (intuition). This lies in the silent anticipation of the wishes of the powerful, without a word or gesture needing to be uttered ('lip-reading'). On reaching Project Three, the shock was a double demolition: to find alarming inadequacies in the concept of competences (Boyatzis) which is foundational in contemporary human resource practice, including recruiting; and the concept of intuitive expertise arising from long, immersed practice (Dreyfus & Dreyfus) not surviving long in its place.

This is half of my answer to the question I posed in the Introduction (section 1.3): why does the shift to radical sociality take so long (not until Project Four)? What really changes? Part of what changes is a work of demolition or clearing, reflecting how interwoven are the strands of my taken-for-granted understanding.

But the other half of my answer is a process of construction, more experiential than intellectual. I have experienced three years of working with difference, using conflict and challenge as part of creating relatively durable intersubjective knowledge about human affairs, in place of deceptive objectivity mimicked from the physical sciences.

As project succeeded project, I began *to experience* an answer to the anxiety which dominated the start of this research (Introduction, section 1.2): if we cannot stand on science, can we stand on anything at all? Is all we have plural, meaningless chaos – and if so how is meaningful and ethical action possible? It seems my increasingly inadequate Cartesian foundations did not finally give way until I felt *in the flesh* different conditions of possibility for action. The old ground refused to give way until I experienced somewhere else to stand. Here – between Projects Three and Four – a transition takes place which, as remarked in the note placed at that point, is not a turning to a radically social perspective outside of me, but a change in my own understanding of myself in the world.

‘In the flesh’ is not rhetoric. The conflict and challenge of the journey on which nine of us embarked three years ago have involved pain. Six of us withdrew, for a mixture of medical reasons, personal choice or on faculty advice. One has received a master’s degree: two remain. As colleagues and in learning sets, we became involved in each other’s fate. This journey has been undertaken in the flesh.

### **6.3 Critical reflections**

Having drawn the four projects together, three questions stand out for me as priorities for critique. These provide the subject matter for sections 6.4, 6.5 and 6.6.

Firstly, narrative and personal identity. Narratives have been a fundamental building block of each project – why? This is not only a question of method: what of the fact that selection interviewing also concerns people and their stories? To what concept of personal identity does this work point?

Secondly, subjectivity and objectivity. Initially through Elias’ understanding of involvement and detachment, then with borrowings from Stacey, and culminating with Bourdieu, this has been a central theme. What sense do I make of these understandings in relation to each other? Are they a coherent thread or broken and contradictory? New work by Stacey (2010) suggests the latter.

Thirdly, whatever the reasons just suggested in section 6.2.3, the full weight of Bourdieu's conceptualisation of practice surfaces late in this research. If we take practice not as one kind of human activity (distinct, say, from detached reflection) but as foundational for the whole range of human meaning-making, then this conceptual framework cuts to the core of our understanding of ourselves and our world. Further work to sharpen what I am saying and to make it more accessible to challenge is a priority. To do this I will return to Karl Weick and take up his idea of sense-making.

## **6.4 Narrative and personal identity**

### **6.4.1 The significance of narrative**

I wrote in Project Two, section 3.8:

... I have been deeply struck by the unity of the challenge of this research (method) with the challenge of interviewing a candidate for a job (my substantive inquiry). Both in this research, and when someone is being interviewed, we are seeking to explore a range of experience which to a large extent is only accessible by the individual recalling that experience, making assertions about it and reliving it in narration.

In opening up the connections between narrative and personal identity, I will leave large parts of identity as a subject untouched – even parts directly relevant to themes raised earlier<sup>56</sup>. Instead, my focus is to ask why has narrative been central to this work? How does this relate to the place of narrative in the practice of interviewing? And what does this mean for personal identity?

I suspect that every interviewer immediately knows the difference between a narrative and a summary of events when they ask for one and their interviewee gives them the other. In the first an experience is, to a degree, lived or re-lived; the second presents itself as a statement of facts. In my interview practice, stories help me glimpse – imperfectly - how a person understood what they were doing at the time;

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<sup>56</sup> For example identity is a central theme for feminist thinkers (cf Project Four, section 7.1). See for example 'Feminism After Bourdieu' (Adkins & Skeggs, 2004). This theme is developed further in the context of identity and reflexivity by Adams (2006).



what mattered to them; what worried or delighted them; how influential (or not) they experienced themselves as being in the situation; and how successful (or not) their actions seemed to themselves. Practised story-tellers and actors can dissimulate, but mostly when we are ‘deceived’ by a person’s narration of an experience of some significance to them, we are being deceived by their own misperceptions and blind spots more than by their artifice. Imperfectly, we enter their *habitus*.

Stories, then, are important if we consider the person’s lived experience important. While the reference to sense-making anticipates section 6.6, Weick puts this point powerfully. Stories are carriers of how we understand our world, evoking participative responses both synchronically (between people) and diachronically (in the same person’s memory):

If accuracy is nice but not necessary in sensemaking, then what is necessary? The answer is, something that preserves plausibility and coherence, something that is reasonable and memorable, something that embodies past experience and expectations, something that resonates with other people, something that can be constructed retrospectively but also can be used prospectively, something that captures both feeling and thought, something that allows for embellishment to fit current oddities, something that is fun to construct. In short, what is necessary in sensemaking is a good story.

A good story holds disparate elements together long enough to energize and guide action, plausibly enough to allow people to make retrospective sense of whatever happens, and engagingly enough that others will contribute their own inputs in the interest of sensemaking. (Weick, 1995, pp. 60-61)

Narratives have been the bedrock of this research because I take humans to be capable of insight which influences their own action and that of others. That insight is always corrigible (ie we misrecognize our own actions) but it is rarely meaningless. If we accept this, then any study of human activity which does not capture that insight simply fails, in its reductionism, to address reality. Conversely if we reject this assumption, then *any* research as a human process – including research of the most scientific and empirical kind - is deluded.

A leading thinker about identity and narrative is Paul Ricoeur. I interpret his study 'Oneself as Another' (1992) as a meticulous exploration of human identity in which he argues that the self is radically social (meaningless without 'another' and 'others'). Ricoeur suggests that a human identity is, fundamentally, a dialogue and a struggle between two different kinds of sameness or continuity in one body – the identity of objectivity in which two entities are 'one and the same', or interchangeable or possess uninterrupted continuity in time (*idem* or sameness) and the identity of subjectivity and agency – I who speak and act, who promised you yesterday and will (or not) keep my promise today (*ipse* or selfhood)(ibid., pp. 116-117):

... it is within the framework of narrative theory that the concrete dialectic of selfhood and sameness ... attains its fullest development. (Ibid., p. 114)

Moreover, through emplotment – an idea kindred to sense-making (ibid., p. 141) - narrative weaves together action and happenstance, choice and chance, sense and nonsense, making the sense which is human existence. A narrative expresses an identity not only through what it claims happened but through what it implies might have happened:

In truth, the narrative does not merely tolerate these variations, it engenders them, it seeks them out. (Ibid., p. 148)

with the net result that the narrative unity of a life:

... must be seen as an unstable mixture of fabulation and actual experience. (Ibid., p. 162)

The significance of narrative within this research can now be located in a context. Ricoeur goes on to identify the significance for human identity not only of practices, but of the larger combinations or sequences of these into:

... life plans ... those vast practical units that make up the professional life, family life, leisure time and so forth. (Ibid., p. 157)

His focus on this, as well as on ‘an unstable mixture of fabulation and actual experience’ fits well my first year of experience in my new career advice business (Project Three). My experience is of working with clients in a way which is intense because of the kind of clients I seek<sup>57</sup> and because (unlike a search professional) my professional obligation is now unambiguously towards a person, not an organisation. In our time together<sup>58</sup> we work with my client’s experience, seeing new things within it and trying different ‘fabulations’ around it. In this emergent work part of my role is to be mindful of the strong but not unchallengeable resistance of *habitus* and field to change.

#### **6.4.2 Narrative, interviewing and personal identity**

Bourdieu has trenchant things to say about interviews which go to the heart of personal identity. Recall that this was the subject of my disagreement with him in Project Two (section 3.8). He declines the invitation of his colleague and interlocutor, Wacquant, to say something about ‘the private person Pierre Bourdieu’, and I go on to make this charge:

I vigorously contend that *contra* Bourdieu, in order to be as real as may be, reflexive sociology cannot limit itself to sanitised words from a fictitious impersonal occupant of my social class and professional track. To be so limited is to resurrect the ghost of the detached scientific observer, albeit clothed in some social habits and outlooks. (Section 3.8)

Of course, there is no neutrality here: my *habitus* and economic livelihood as a selection interviewer and career adviser both depend on, and produce, commitments to the significance of individuality.

In his essay ‘The Biographical Illusion’ (2000a) Bourdieu takes up interviews in a broad sense. He argues that interviews should not be seen as revealing an inner constancy but as the social production of a succession of remarks, produced for various contingent reasons and effects:

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<sup>57</sup> Ones wishing to explore a marked shift in career direction: in other words a lot of their identity is at stake.

<sup>58</sup> Over the first year of my new business, the ‘three hour’ discussions whose creation I explored in Project Three have ranged between three and three and a half hours.

... unconscious assumptions about the interview (like the concern for chronology, and all that which is inherent in the representation of life as history), and through the interview situation which, depending upon the objective distance between the interviewer and the interviewee and the ability of the interviewer to ‘manipulate’ this relationship, will move from this mild form of official interrogation (which is most often, without the knowledge of the sociologist, sociological inquiry), right to the secret, moving through the more or less conscious representation that the one queried will make of the situation of inquiry. This representation will be based on the interviewee’s direct or indirect experience of equivalent situations (interview of a famous writer, or politician, examinations taken, etc), and these will direct all his efforts to presentation of self, or rather, to production of self. (Bourdieu, 2000a, p. 301)<sup>59</sup>

Thus far I would agree. Bourdieu goes on to link the idea of selves to the production of narratives. But unlike Ricoeur’s narrative in which the tension between conflicting purposes and chance is central, here Bourdieu treats narrative as thin and linear:

... The autobiographical narrative is always at least partially motivated by a concern to give meaning, to rationalize, to show the inherent logic, both for the past and for the future, to make consistent and constant, through the creation of intelligible relationships, like that of the cause (immediate or final) between successive states, which are thus turned into *steps* of a necessary development.

...

To produce a life history or to consider life as a history, that is, as a coherent narrative of a significant and directed sequence of events, is perhaps to conform to a rhetorical illusion, to the common representation of existence that a whole literary tradition has always and still continues to reinforce. (Ibid., p. 298)

Noting Shakespeare’s ‘tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing’, Bourdieu argues that identity is a fiction instituted by the State (in the registration of a proper name) in the guise of an act of recording (ibid., p. 300).

Moreover:

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<sup>59</sup> Atkinson and Silverman (1997) contend that we are living in an ‘interview society’ in which, both generally and in qualitative research, individuals speaking about their own lives are taken at face value. They do not discuss selection interviews. These, because of their competitive structure and interests at stake, do not normally take interviewees’ answers uncritically.

... The proper name cannot describe properties and conveys no information about that which it names; since what it designates is only a complex and disparate rhapsody of biological and social properties undergoing constant flux, all descriptions are valid only within the limits of a specific stage or place. (Ibid., p. 300)

But in Bourdieu's view is there nothing durable about a person?

Without doubt one can find in the *habitus* the active principle, irreducible to passive perceptions, of the unification of the practices and of the representations (that is the historically constituted, hence, historically situated, equivalent of this self of which, according to Kant, one must postulate the existence in order to account for the synthesis of the various sensations given through intuition, and for the liaison of representations in a consciousness). But this practical identity reveals itself to intuition only in the inexhaustible series of its successive manifestations, in such a way that the only manner of apprehending it as such consists perhaps in attempting to recapture it in the unity of an integrative narrative ... . (Ibid., p. 299)

In this essay Bourdieu takes the step against which I railed prematurely in Project Two. He now says not merely that the personality (whatever is left over beyond *habitus*) is beyond sociological inquiry – that was the point Bourdieu made when he said:

Sociology treats as identical all biological individuals who, being products of the same objective conditions, have the same *habitus*. (1990a, p. 59)

but that it is 'a tale told by an idiot ... signifying nothing'.

Of course the experience of being a self does *not* simply signify what the individual (or 'idiot') doxically believes – that is the burden of misrecognition. But equally, as Bourdieu has maintained throughout his work, it does not signify nothing. In this particular expression of his thought perhaps we hear the cynic's voice, rather than that of the person who wrote:

It is because agents never know completely what they are doing that what they do has more sense than they know. (Ibid., p. 69)

or the Bourdieu who, while emphatically rejecting the ‘subject from nowhere’ – transhistorical, *causa sui* – also rejects the exaggeration of *habitus* to be something monolithic or immutable, ‘leaving no room in any circumstances for conscious intention’ (2000b, pp. 115, 64).

The ‘idiot’ claim in ‘The Biographical Illusion’ (originally published in 1986 in *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*), may be rhetorical overstatement. Taken literally, Bourdieu lacks the courage of his convictions. He should have called for the abandoning of referencing of previous academic work by authors’ names: an attribution to a social/trajectory classification and a publication date should suffice if the proper name, a fiction of the State, tells us nothing more of value.

That Bourdieu shrinks from telling us about himself the kind of details he tells us in his work on Heidegger (like Bourdieu a provincial character risen to intellectual heights) – ‘[Heidegger’s] belated and purely scholastic acquisition of an educated language’, ‘this dark, athletic little man, an accomplished skier, with energetic but impassive features’, ‘his penchant for anti-semitism’, ‘his total lack of a sense of humour’ (1991b, pp. 47-49) – is Bourdieu’s privilege, as a private human being. But it is a privacy we accord him because he has an identity which is more than his sociological co-ordinates, and which matters.

## **6.5 Subjectivity and objectivity**

My second critical focus is shifts in how I have worked with the theme of subjectivity and objectivity through the projects, and whether these differences conceal important contradictions. I will first reprise this journey, from Elias via Stacey to Bourdieu, underlining its continuity.

Project One formulates this theme in the Eliasian terms of involvement and detachment (1987). I noted Elias’ conception that humanity’s first mode of relating to the world was engagement, dominated by highly involved, magico-mythic thinking. From this emerged detachment, including science, which yielded great material advantages in controlling and using non-sentient matter but was less

effective when we tried to understand ourselves. Elias rejected Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum* as absurd, as positing a fantastic 'I without a we' (ibid., pp. 14, 57). For Elias a 'subject-object relationship' conceived in this Cartesian way is an inadequate basis for thinking about knowledge; instead we are always involved and detached at the same time.

In Project Two I take steps which I understand as intensifying involvement *and* detachment in this research: I try to be bold, I try not to 'hide anything' (section 3.9). That is the intensified subjectivity. My idea of intensified objectivity is to try to put as much effort and boldness into criticising what I say as into saying it. But I conclude that this is misconceived. I have remained in a Cartesian trap – trying to 'do reflexivity' as Robinson Crusoe might, still thinking fundamentally atomically, remaining caught around the pole of my subjectivity. I draw on Stacey and Griffin to illuminate that:

If one takes the view that knowledge emerges and evolves in a *history* of social interaction, rather than being developed by an autonomous individual, then one attaches central importance to research as a participative, social process. Research on organizations is then done by participating in a community of researchers who are together exploring the meaning they are making of their experience. This inevitably involves conflict as people explore their differences and, indeed, this conflict is essential for the movement of thought. (Stacey & Griffin, 2005, p. 23)

This lays the foundation in Project Three (and subsequently) for an intensified effort to work with difference in wider literature – for example juxtaposing Dreyfus & Dreyfus' scheme for expertise with Weick's for improvisation.

The interpretation I offer in Project Four of Bourdieu's understanding of science and social science as disinterested practices (section 5.7.3) has common ground with Elias' production of detachment as a social accomplishment from an original state of involvement, and with Stacey's and Griffin's conception of research as historical, social and conflictual. This is the argument that my thread is coherent.

But thinking from Stacey (2010) suggests that I have overlooked serious differences. Stacey starts from a position of bafflement as to how dominant thinking about

management and organisations can continue apparently undeflected, not only by the multiple experiences of failed prediction and contradiction which are (Stacey argues) the daily lot of organisational life but also by a massive global financial crisis, unplanned and unpredicted. He then recapitulates his dissection of the problems in this mode of thinking. A number of these themes appeared in Project One – especially systems thinking and split thinking about causality. But Stacey now goes further to suggest why manifest failings may leave the dominant mode of thinking undisturbed.

In part he draws on Elias to suggest that this as-if or pretend-science is functioning as the magico-mythic thinking of modern society. Precisely because it works badly, it leaves us in the grip of the powerlessness, fear and anxiety which natural science (working rather well) often in our physical lives lets us escape. In other words, the ‘miracles’ which science works in our daily lives enable as-if science to function as a religion (and keep us powerless) in our organisational lives (ibid., pp. 99-100).

But he criticises Elias for not fully exploring his own distinction between involvement and detachment (ibid., p. 101). Elias seems to assume that detached thinking is more realistic, but detachment could be abstraction as a flight from reality. Involvement (for example in the form of a therapist’s engagement with a client’s emotions) could be a greater awareness of reality. Instead Stacey proposes that we are always engaged, simultaneously and paradoxically, in processes of *immersion into* and *abstraction from* the local interactions which are our lives.

By ‘immersing’ Stacey means:

... to describe what we are doing as we act locally in ways which unconsciously reflect the generalizations and idealizations, the *habitus* of our society. (Ibid., p. 108)

while ‘abstracting’ means ‘simplifying, generalizing and categorizing’ our experience in one of two ways. Firstly, ways (such as narrative) which keep the original complexity of action close to hand<sup>60</sup> - he calls these first-order abstractions.

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<sup>60</sup> Relevant to the discussion of narrative in section 4.1.  
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Or secondly, ways (such as a mission statement or an abstract discussion of research methods) which simplify, generalize and categorize other abstractions rendering original complexity invisible – second-order abstractions<sup>61</sup>.

We can now go to the crux of important differences in treating subjectivity and objectivity which Stacey sees between Bourdieu and Elias, and between both of them and himself, and which my claim of coherence overlooked:

Bourdieu's notion of pre-occupation in the game seems close to Elias' involved thinking and Bourdieu's reference to rational planning seems close to detached thinking. Nevertheless, Bourdieu dismisses the rational planning and focuses on pre-occupation, so taking the opposite view to Elias. However, in most of his other work Elias argues in terms of interdependence and *habitus* where reality congruence is a problematic notion. It seems to me that Elias presents a duality of involved and detached thinking and regards a move towards the detached pole as desirable while Bourdieu proposes a similar duality with the preoccupied mode at one pole and the rational planned mode at the other pole, his preference being for the former. Neither presents a strong paradox where both involved-preoccupied and detached-planned are practised at the same time: after all people do make plans and at the same time, they are preoccupied in the game, acting out the *habitus* in which they live. (Ibid., pp. 107-108)

Having discussed in Project Four differences between Bourdieu and Elias in interpretations of *habitus*, here I will stick to differences within the theme of involvement and detachment. Stacey makes at least two important contributions to this discussion.

Firstly, Stacey emphasises that for Bourdieu, *illusio* is the foundation of meaningful action (ibid., p. 107, citing Bourdieu 1998a, pp. 77-78), its opposite being uninterest to the point of not noticing. I am arguing that from this primary state we construct, as social practices and processes, possibilities for detachment – because some games have detachment or disinterest as their stakes (Project Four, section 5.7.4).

Reflexivity of any importance – certainly for Bourdieu reflexivity with any potential

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<sup>61</sup> Stacey emphasises that he is not critical of second-order abstractions *per se*; indeed science and modernity would be impossible without them. What he suggests is that we have not fully noticed the extent either of the explosion in second-order abstraction in modern organisational life or the accompanying disappearance of the original complexity of local action from our view (ibid., pp. 108-116).

to challenge what is taken as obvious, doxic, common sense, part of the *habitus* of an activity – needs to take the form of engagement in an appropriate new game, and not simply be wistful self-contemplation.

I demur from Stacey's suggestion that Bourdieu neglects the significance of detachment or is in this respect oppositely situated to Elias. For me, Bourdieu had no more consistent passion than to raise social science to the greatest detachment, or objectivity, or realism, of which it was capable (2004, pp. 89-91); a process of difficult work, social and historically contingent through and through. In this respect I see little difference with Elias, who in 'Involvement and Detachment' (1987) is at pains to remind us not only how valuable – life-saving, in the parable of the maelström – detachment is, but how long a journey of centuries society needed to travel to pass on to us a *habitus* which embodies high levels of detachment and makes us moderns (ibid., pp. 34-35, 75-76, 108-112)<sup>62</sup>.

Secondly, Stacey suggests that Bourdieu and Elias offer discourses with a weak sense of paradox, which for Stacey makes them less congruent with lived experience. The marks of paradox are two elements in tension, present simultaneously and neither making sense without the other. Paradox requires, as well as tension, necessary inter-dependence as the reason for co-presence. Thus, a radically social view considers the terms 'individual' and 'society' in this way.

The three years of this research, subjecting to intense inquiry much experience not recorded here (plenary and learning set meetings, discussions of discarded draft projects), has persuaded me that the absence of paradox *is* a valuable warning sign of an inadequate conceptualisation. (I stop short of arguing that paradox is always

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<sup>62</sup> Disagreeing with Stacey's claim prompts me to ask whether I see some other important difference between Bourdieu and Elias. I think so. I now notice how Bourdieu's language enables him to distance himself from emotions. Elias talks repeatedly of fear, frightening magico-mythic worlds, shame and other emotions. Bourdieu wraps all this up in *illusio*. This remarkable, fertile concept of absorption in a game allows him to say the equivalent of 'all human life is here' – witness the remark of the football manager that football is far more important than life and death. So in the wrapper of *illusio*, Bourdieu can have fear, shame and joy, but he does not have to deal with them as directly as Elias. Following the explosion of emotion at the end of Project Two, did I find it safer to shift towards a more dispassionate reflexivity?

essential. I do not know whether human experience in all societies at all times must be paradoxical.)

Bourdieu sees his own thought as paradoxical:

[Pascal] points beyond the dilemma of objectivism and subjectivism: ‘By space the universe comprehends me and swallows me up like an atom; by thought I comprehend the world.’ ... .

From this paradoxical relationship of double inclusion flow all the paradoxes which Pascal assembled under the heading of wretchedness and greatness, and which ought to be meditated on by all those who remain trapped in the scholastic dilemma of determinism and freedom: determined (wretchedness), man can know his determinations (greatness) and work to overcome them. (2000b, pp. 130-131)

I experience now an understanding of the world both enchanted and disenchanting at the same time, which leads me to agree with Bourdieu. That world is constructed by repeated acts of reflexive social practice which try to disenchant it – to overcome misrecognition. Yet each blow must misrecognize itself; it springs from its own *illusio* and *habitus*, its own things not yet defined which it takes for granted in order not to take its object for granted. I understand contemporary humanity as both inhabiting and creating a world of unending disenchantment – yet by the same token unending enchantment, an enchantment never exhausted by the process which unfolds.

## **6.6 Bourdieu and Weick: practice and sense-making**

My third priority in terms of critique is to sharpen and make more accessible to challenge the conceptualisation of practice which I have drawn from Bourdieu. To do this, I return to working with difference – specifically contrasting practice with sense-making as developed by Karl Weick, on whom I drew in Project Three. Weick’s work is more widely understood among management scholars working in English than Bourdieu’s<sup>63</sup>.

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<sup>63</sup> An alternative path which I have declined (because of space and because sense-making is a more developed and widely known body of thought) would follow the take up of practice and *habitus* by

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Bourdieu (1930-2002) and Weick (1936- ) are contemporaries, but neither in Weick's principal exposition of sense-making (1995) nor in two volumes of papers collected over three decades (2001) (2009) does he cite Bourdieu or *habitus*. Nor do I know of any citation by Bourdieu in the opposite direction.

Both *habitus* and sense-making are attempts to give an account of human meaning-making and agency *in action* – in pressured and complex worlds which, uninterpreted, would overwhelm any possibility of thoughtful agency. Both scholars break sharply from the supposition that a rational, Cartesian mind could simply contemplate the totality of what exists and formulate logical actions:

The concept of sensemaking ... is intended to break the stranglehold that decisionmaking and rational models have had on organizational theory ... . (Weick, 2009, p. 194)

We can see in the thought of both scholars an echo of the Heideggerian idea that we are agents thrown into a world of concern and pressed to act (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 174, 236). And to the extent that rational thought-before-action *is* our doxic understanding of ourselves, both Bourdieu and Weick make a fundamental claim of misrecognition. Both say our common sense is mistaken: but the interpretations which they offer instead are different.

Weick traces his 'fascination' with sense-making back to conversations in the early 1960s with individuals such as Harold Garfinkel (Weick, 1995, p. 10). Weick cites a central tenet of sense-making from research on trial juries:

In place of the view that decisions are made as the occasions require, an alternative formulation needs to be entertained. It consists of the

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psychologically oriented writers. Lizardo has written illuminatingly about the influence which he sees of the developmental psychologist Jean Piaget on Bourdieu (Lizardo, 2004): very relevant to 'tearing the banknote in half'. Piaget emphasised the bodily nature of human being, as did Merleau-Ponty: Crossley has provided an account of Bourdieu's *habitus* which emphasises the connections with Merleau-Ponty and Mead (Crossley, 2001). Pickel offers from 'a systemic and mechanistic philosophy of science perspective' an interpretation of *habitus* which in my view is reductionist and not radically social (Pickel, 2005). Turner attacks radical sociality and Bourdieu from an atomic perspective lacking in reflexivity: he finds them unscientific and quasi-Marxist (Turner, 2007).

possibility that the person defines retrospectively the decisions that have been made. *The outcome comes before the decision*. In the material reported here, jurors did not actually have an understanding of the conditions that defined a correct decision until after the decision had been made. Only in retrospect did they decide what they did that made their decisions correct ones. (Garfinkel, 1984, pp. 113-114)

Whereas Bourdieu's logic of practice is anticipatory – the player 'adjusts not to what he sees but what he fore-sees, sees in advance in the directly perceived present' (1990a, p. 81) – Weick takes a different tack. After referring to William James' uninterpreted (and, if left uninterpreted, overwhelming and meaningless) 'stream of experience', Weick takes as self-evident that we can only attend to what is past:

... Experience as we know it exists in the form of distinct events. But the only way we get this impression is by stepping outside the stream of experience and directing attention to it. And it is only possible to direct attention to what exists, that is, what has already passed. (Weick, 1995, p. 25)

In passing, for Weick attention is detached whereas for Bourdieu anticipation is involved, but let us look more closely at what Weick argues we can notice. Firstly, in the face of the potentially overwhelming stream, agents do not need more information but more interpretation:

... Investigators who favour the metaphor of information processing ... often view sensemaking, as they do most other problems, as a setting where people need more information. That is not what most people need when they are overwhelmed by equivocality. Instead, they need values, priorities and clarity about preferences to help them be clear about which projects matter. Clarity on values clarifies what is important in elapsed experience, which finally gives some sense of what that elapsed experience means. (Ibid., pp. 27-28)

For Weick, meaningful experience is not simply 'there' in the flux of the physical world, but humanly constructed. 'Noticing' is a kind of action. Secondly, then, what an agent is capable of noticing is influenced by her possibilities for action. Pointing to the history by which medical professionals came to 'notice' unexplained fractured bones as child abuse, Weick summarises:

When people develop the capacity to act on something, then they can afford to see it. (2009, p. 32)

This observation chimes with the suggestion in section 6.2.3 above that only at the end of Project Three – when sufficient experience had accumulated for me to feel that thoughtful action would still be possible on the far side of a shift to radical sociality - did I notice things which prompted that shift.

Finally, we recall from section 6.4 the central role for Weick of stories as carriers of sense. To do its work, sense does not have to be exact – as in the example of soldiers lost in a snowstorm who survive thanks to a map of the wrong mountain (1995, p. 54).

A key problem in Project Four - individuals moving to unfamiliar organizational settings – has been studied using sense-making. Meryl Reis Louis (1980), a management scholar, identifies previous theorisation of this subject as reliant on rational agency and its associated expectations. Sense-making offers a more adequate account, she suggests, than explanations of recruitment wastage centred on *conscious* expectations *rationally* formed *prior* to entering the new organization – ie thought-before-action.

Among other things, Louis points out that surprises may arise at least as much from the new entrant's mistaken assumptions about herself (what I can and want to do) as from mistaken expectations of the job (Louis, 1980, pp. 245-246). This 'thicker' account of major transition for which Louis argues sits well alongside that which I gave using *habitus* in Project Four, section 5.6 – for example the idea that what the agent will turn out to want is itself a significant unknown.

But the heart of the matter is the relationship of sense-making to action: how does this compare with the logic of practice and *habitus*? The following are the central features of Louis' sense-making account (ibid., p. 242). Drawn to notice features of the environment by contrast and surprise, the agent makes fresh sense of her situation. She is influenced by past experiences and interpretative schemes, her predispositions and purposes and others' interpretations. The agent then 'selects' her

behavioural response (she acts). The sense freshly made, as well as unplanned consequences of the action and new changes in the environment, lead to a fresh sense-making/action cycle.

Comparing this to Bourdieu's logic of practice, the similarity is that under the pressure of time and involvement, the experienced reality to which the agent responds is heavily interpreted in a way which is not fully conscious. This interpretative matrix is affected by what happens (including interaction with others) and by the agent's own history, and it carries forward with both continuity and the possibility of change to the next action cycle. However there are important differences.

In sense-making the agent sees a constructed past. Constructing a visual metaphor, we can picture this as an agent who strides forward but whose head faces backwards - sense-making came alive for me when I first experienced this unorthodox image as more accurate than the conventional (forward facing) picture. Indeed if we were to focus on the top-level decision-making of a business, the sense-making picture fits extremely well. Management information systems necessarily look backwards. Colloquially we speak of someone leading an organisation 'by looking in the rear view mirror'. The curriculum vitae of candidates for a role tell us what they claim to have done in the past.

What the sense-making agent 'sees' (or notices) in this constructed past is much influenced by surprise or discrepancy. Progressively greater failure of parts of the environment to function as expected trigger progressively deeper, or more active, thinking<sup>64</sup>. This is contrasted with habitual, or relatively unconscious, thinking, often with a tendency – while not dismissing habitual thinking as unproductive - to value conscious modes of thinking as more potent<sup>65</sup>.

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<sup>64</sup> This line of thought is central to Heidegger's conception of human being, and has been developed into a 'taxonomy of surprise' and associated modes of thinking by Yanow and Tsoukas (2009). While their apparent emphasis is classificatory, there are some indicators that they take habitual or unconscious thought to be the lesser relation.

<sup>65</sup> Or, for example 'more mindful', 'controlled' versus 'automatic' thinking (Weick, 2009, p. 55). Weick has developed ideas of organisational mindfulness as contributors to functioning with high reliability (ibid., pp. 98-99).

By contrast, in Bourdieu's logic of practice, the agent's gaze is involved and anticipatory: the product of the interaction of *habitus* and field is that she 'fore-sees' the game (she does not in the act of gazing construct a conscious predictive model which a retrospective sense-maker may choose to do). The agent's focus is the game. This seems to me a more accurate and richer description than making different kinds of surprise the dominant explanation for focussed attention. An agent with a particular feel for the game may give rapt attention to a fifth day of repetitive cricket; a priest marking forty years in the priesthood may be overwhelmed by celebrating communion; yet both events may be entirely free of surprise. Games have other drivers beyond surprise. The Bourdieusian agent not only faces in a different direction but does so with a different kind of gaze.

Moreover, Bourdieusian practice leaves open whether more conscious, more active, or more reflective thought will be more effective than the product of an expert *habitus* which closely matches its counterposed field. The situational openness of which mode of thinking should be preferred would be better reflected, perhaps, if we spoke of thinking which is 'slow' (rational, explicit) versus 'fast' (the product of matching *habitus* and field). Hares and tortoises can both find ways to make livings<sup>66</sup>.

We may note two further differences before drawing the threads of this comparison together. Firstly, Weick emphasises the extent to which the environment can become what the agent makes of it (of course it then acts circularly back on the agent):

The problem is that [the environment] is empty. If the environment is empty then it is not surprising that people are able to enact the conditions that in turn enact them. (2009, p. 203)

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<sup>66</sup> Louis' suggestion that more conscious thinking is always better when stakes are high is rebutted by Dreyfus & Dreyfus, notably in the experiment in which video recordings of five students and one experienced paramedic giving cardiopulmonary resuscitation were shown to other experienced paramedics, students and instructors. Asked whom they would choose to save their own lives in an emergency, nine out of ten experienced paramedics picked their counterpart, while seven out of ten instructors picked students (the students themselves were in between). 'The instructors, attempting to find the paramedic by looking for the individual closely following the rules they taught, failed to find the expert because an experienced paramedic has passed beyond the rule-following stage' (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986, pp. 200-201).



By contrast the Bourdieusian agent faces fields which may at times seem near-solid.

Secondly, conflict is intrinsic to the radically social conception of field and symbolic power (Project Four, section 5.5). By contrast, in many atomic accounts conflict recedes or disappears. This happens in interesting ways in Weick's world. A prominent feature of his work is studies of life-threatening situations such as child abuse, tragedy on the space shuttle and wildfires (2009, pp. 31, 111, 246). These settings offer him possibilities to treat goals (such as saving life) as if they were non-conflictual and ethically unproblematic. In this respect there is not only an absence of conflict and ethical complexity in Weick's work relative to Bourdieu's, but also a less rigorous reflexivity.

Pictorially, the Bourdieusian agent is like a centaur whose rational eyes look backwards (see the past), but whose equine, preconscious eyes look forward and see (and the body already begins its response to) what the interaction of *habitus* and field reveal – a field of possibilities which is also full of constraints. Of course the picture is clumsy, but it is a step I am trying to take in my thinking which not only captures difference but hints at possible complementarity.

We can now see clear differences between the Bourdieusian and the Weickian agent. Because of sense-making's backwards focus, its description of how the agent's options for action materialise is thin. 'Select behavioural response' is a limited concept compared to the generative capacity of the *habitus*. This limitation shows as Weick explores how agents can act creatively - the question of improvisation which we explored in Project Three (section 4.3.5) was a central one for him. Since Weickian agents look backwards, a reference point fixed in the past (a source melody) is central to his analysis of improvisation.

But there is some complementarity. We confronted in Project Four the difficulty of taking further insightful steps in our account of what follows when an agent moves to a very different field: the torn banknote (mismatched *habitus* and field) took us some way, but can Weick take us further? During such a period of mismatch, the Bourdieusian agent is in the position of a centaur whose equine instincts are failing.

Then, all is thrown back on the rational, backward-looking eyes, and sense-making offers a valuable account of what may - for a period - happen<sup>67</sup>.

The suggestions about agency which have emerged from this work are sketchy but I am excited about the possibilities which open up. A horse in a field has more chance of provoking interest and challenge from my colleague practitioners than a *habitus* in a field. The image solicits fresh action. Graspable within a few minutes, it invites interviewers to see both candidates and themselves in a way which foregrounds and changes their understandings of rational thinking, intuition and the springs of action.

From Weick the practice of interviewing also gains a valuable description of the kind of panel discussion following selection interviews to which as a result of this research I now aspire, as part of moving beyond the ‘measurement’ or scientific mindset:

... Deeper knowledge develops when people attend to more things, entertain a greater variety of interpretations, differentiate their ideas, argue, listen to one another, work to reconcile differences, and commit to revisiting and updating whatever profound simplicities they settle on as guidelines for action. (2009, p. 21)

## **6.7 Method**

### **6.7.1 The nature of my knowledge claim; validity and generalisability**

Project Four proposed that knowledge claims – even those of natural science - are not transcendental or universal, but particular, local in a place and time, and social, and that research has the characteristics of a disinterested practice. The judging of claims as valid is a recognition of them by members of a research community as worth exploring seriously. That recognition is always local but never ‘merely’ local; it is shaped by, and shapes, an academic *habitus* and game, with particular stakes.

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<sup>67</sup> A weakness of this image is the way in which, with a cartoon flourish, it covers over the relationship between practice and detached reasoning. I treated this in section 5.

I offer this dissertation to seek that recognition at a place, the University of Hertfordshire, which – borrowing a definition adopted by the national research funding councils in 1996 – articulates the game’s stakes like this:

Research ... is to be understood as original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding. It includes work of direct relevance to the needs of commerce and industry, as well as to the public and voluntary sectors; scholarship; the invention and generation of ideas, images, performances and artefacts including design, where these lead to new or substantially improved insights; and the use of existing knowledge in experimental development to produce new or substantially improved materials, devices, products and processes, including design and construction ... . (University of Hertfordshire, 2006, p. A32)

What is a ‘gain’ in knowledge and understanding? My claim is that it is the same kind of process which underlies what Project Four called a ‘weak ethical gravity’ in relation to what makes for better interviewing or worse, better judgements about candidates or worse: a process which Stacey and Griffin articulate in this way:

Justification and validity arise in complex social acts in which people refer to the sensuous experience they have in common of the real world they live in. What people are doing, as they engage in this way, is exchanging propositions, and the product of the inquiry process is a challenge to existing ways of thinking; that is, transformation and movement in the nature of the propositional beliefs held by the inquirers. As such movement occurs people find themselves fitting into the social nexus in a different way. Making a contribution to knowledge is, therefore, engaging in this social process so as to produce movement in thought and so action. (2005, p. 39)

The understanding of science and social science which I offered in Project Four suggests that the best which we can do to establish validity is to keep challenging misrecognition reflexively – to keep exploring with others who find these stakes important whether the sense we are making together of our actions as researchers is the best we can currently offer.

One aspect of this reflexivity has been to include and explore narratives of this research itself: these appear in all the projects except Three. These open up research as a practice and make it easier to ask what are we *doing* together – rather than what we believe we are doing. The same point applies in relation to the narratives of my

practice. Exploring the narratives with others with different backgrounds has enabled challenge of what has been omitted, or could be noticed and interpreted differently.

Another has been to work with difference – to identify patterns of similarity and difference and using these to crystallise questions and to bring unnoticed aspects to light. I have found this a profoundly valuable step – to find (and to be helped by others to find) intellectual ‘fault lines’ which run through my experience which are as deep as possible: in other words which have been the subject of intense disagreements between able minds with different experience over generations.

Exploring how these fault lines change the sense I am making has offered real reflexive gains. I have been prompted to notice differently. Others who have worked with those fault lines in their own experience can more easily enter mine and offer different insights. Thus the opportunity is created to break out of purely local understandings. Since this work engages with questions as basic as what it is to be a thinking, acting human being, it opens itself to challenge and development on a broad front.

The breadth of experience available through this research programme – international, and including many individuals with their own experiences of selection interviewing as managers and as candidates – has been a major asset. I have also sought conversations with individuals with wide experience of the practice which I am studying<sup>68</sup>. I owe thanks to Dame Janet Paraskeva and Professor Jo Silvester, both of whom made time to meet me and to read several of the projects as well as a draft of this synopsis<sup>69</sup>.

Janet Paraskeva has been chief executive or chair of several organisations. For the last five years she has been the First Civil Service Commissioner, responsible both for chairing herself and guiding the chairing by others of panels which appoint candidates to the most senior posts in UK public administration. The Civil Service

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<sup>68</sup> Not least with women, given my observations in Project Two on gender.

<sup>69</sup> Professor Rakesh Khurana at Harvard met me at an earlier stage of this work, and a research fellow and colleague of Jo Silvester, Dr Efrosyni Konstantinou, read a draft synopsis and commented in detail. I thank them not only for their time, encouragement and insight but also for exemplifying for me, a newcomer, the virtues of the academic *habitus*.

Commissioners are charged by law with ensuring that appointments are made solely on merit. Janet therefore has current experience of making senior appointments her central focus as well as broad experience as a line manager.

Janet said she was ‘pretty sceptical’ of the value of academic research and the motives behind it. She had had experiences of research as a self-promoting activity, exclusive and remote from practical problems. She reacted differently to this work (to the extent of wondering whether she might do some research herself). She recognised the world described and found the themes of power, intuition and skill important. She concurred with the description of the practice as stuck. This research stimulated new reflections for her on her own experience. She asked for further work to address for practitioners these issues and their implications for the concept of merit.

Alongside interviewing is its associated, predominantly scientific, research discourse. Jo Silvester, Professor of Psychology at City University London was formerly associate editor of the International Journal of Selection and Assessment. A current research interest for Jo is the selection of political leaders and the kind of leadership which they provide. She recognises the description of the research field provided here, and the key role of the political in practice. Rather than ‘stuck’, a number of her experiences lead her to speak of active resistance towards currently proffered selection ‘best practices’. She sees the wider discussion for which this research argues as important but not easy to achieve, given the preference of academic journals in the field for scientific incrementalism. As a step towards exploring how an engagement with the psychological perspective might best start, she has offered me the opportunity of a joint lecture in the autumn to her MSc students.

These responses were powerful ones for me - particularly the sense of movement of thought, of a world recognised, and of interest in talking further.

### **6.7.2 Locating this research within the discourse on method**

How knowledge is understood has implications for discussing method. Consider my understanding of knowledge three years ago, which I have variously characterised as

Cartesian, scientific or atomic (overlapping rather than synonymous terms). A solitary mind contemplated the world and asked what it could know of it. This mind placed its faith in reason – leading for example to mathematical laws, considered to be universal or transcendental – and in regularities discovered by science through experimentation. I espoused a kind of naïve logical positivism.

This kind of knowledge was discovered by techniques of reasoning (for example *reductio ad absurdum* to prove that there are different sizes of infinity) or of experiment (for example randomised controlled double-blind trials). Corresponding to techniques are rules. One can ask of some research, on what techniques does it rest? Were the rules of those techniques followed? Was a good choice made between different possible techniques? These constitute a discussion of method, and provide a rationale for comparing the approach taken in any piece of research with approaches taken elsewhere.

On the understanding of knowledge I have put forward, this discussion makes no sense. Knowledge is embedded in social practices: rule-following is meaningless or impossible outside of a common (ie shared) sense. But two different questions make sense in comparing the approach taken here with approaches taken elsewhere:

- into what social practices does this work try to speak? In which games of research are the stakes the ones which matter here? Where, to what extent and with what response does the researcher – who in contrast to the Cartesian perspective cannot be separated from the research – participate in the *habitus* of a research community?<sup>70</sup>
- working with difference – as elsewhere in this work, by contrasting what was done here with similar (but not identical) approaches elsewhere, we may gain sharper awareness of both limitations and potential for development.

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<sup>70</sup> Being a *research* community, the response required is not one of agreement but of recognition – that the research, and researcher, are according to the stakes of that community worth disagreeing (or agreeing) with.

It is with those questions in mind that I identify four types of research (families of research games) as offering fruitful similarities and differences.

Firstly, *hermeneutics*. The process of reworking successive versions of each project, within the context of conversation and challenge within a learning set and through engagement with literature, is in large measure the work of this research. The pattern of iteration is circular, moving outwards to literature returning at each step to the narrative fragment. Hermeneutics is the pattern of research in which, in a circular iteration, a fragment is interpreted in a larger context and the larger context re-examined in the light of new interpretation of the fragment. Alvesson and Sköldberg group together three (overlapping) hermeneutics<sup>71</sup>:

... all are in some sense preoccupied with the uncovering of something hidden. For the existential hermeneutics this hidden something constitutes an original structure of properties buried at the root of our existence, but for this very reason also forgotten. For the poetic hermeneutics, it forms an underlying pattern of metaphor or narrative. For the hermeneutics of suspicion, finally, it is something shameful – for instance in the form of economic interests, sexuality, or power – and therefore repressed. (2009, pp. 96-97)

This research has connections with all three. The structure of *habitus* and field is proposed as an existential structure, how we all are and how we act, without (normally) knowing it. Key features of poetic hermeneutics include narrative and time – the sense of time that is meaningful to an agent (ibid., p. 127). This has been at the heart of the logic of practice. The concept of misrecognition is also related to a hermeneutics of suspicion (though not, as I argued in Project Four, of cynicism).

In noting these connections, it is important however to emphasise a difference: the fragment which is being interpreted is an experience of the author's to which the text gestures, and not, as in many instances of hermeneutics, an isolated text (ibid., p. 100).

Secondly, *critical theory*. This research (in particular Projects Two and Four) has concluded that human communication and relating are intrinsically political, and

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<sup>71</sup> Under the title *alethic hermeneutics* (from the Greek *aletheia*, or uncovering).  
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disputed the interpretation of science as a neutral recording and study of 'facts'. This stance is closely related to that of critical theory, associated in the 1920s with the University of Frankfurt. These connections share common ground with the hermeneutics of suspicion.

Important stakes in this game include identifying political, ideological and special interests, and to distinguishing 'what is socially and psychologically invariant from what is, or can be made to be, socially changeable' (ibid., p. 144). Bourdieu's work falls squarely in this pattern, but with two differences: as we saw in referring to how his work has been taken up by feminist thinkers, some critical thinkers regard Bourdieu as understating the scope for radical change; and Bourdieu himself criticised critical theorists for their lack of interest in empirical studies (ibid., p. 162) (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, & Passeron, 1991, p. 248).

There are political implications to this research. In particular, society has a great deal invested in merit understood in the dominant (as-if scientific) way. Merit underpins many of our social structures and, in particular, access to significant leadership positions. A shift in the understanding of merit could increase the prospects for gender and other diversity in our leadership cadres. It could also undermine some of the case for the explosion in senior remuneration (which, in present market structures, drives search professionals' remuneration). Conversely the promise of a resilient, post-scientific discourse of merit could fail to be delivered, leaving chaos and sacrificing decades of scientific, professional and political struggle against the filling of positions of power by unchallenged instinct and self-interest.

Thirdly, *ethnomethodology*. Taking seriously the agent-researcher's understanding of his own experience has been fundamental in this research. The research stance which focuses particularly on agents' understanding of their own practice is ethnomethodology. However a core principle of ethnomethodology is to insist on understanding a practice using only the agents' own understandings (pure subjectivity). As Garfinkel expresses it:

... A leading policy is to refuse serious consideration to the prevailing proposal that efficiency, efficacy, effectiveness, intelligibility,



consistency, planfulness, typicality, uniformity, reproducibility of activities – ie that rational properties of practical activities – be assessed, recognized, categorized, described by using a rule or a standard obtained outside actual settings within which such properties are recognized, used, produced and talked about by settings' members. (Garfinkel, 1984, p. 33)

This excludes in a fundamental way working with concepts such as *habitus* and field, or the idea of misrecognition. What this says about the limitations and weaknesses of this research is that, notwithstanding its critique of science misappropriated or misapplied, it too may be open to similar objections. My efforts to say something which is not simply a subjective opinion may be mistaken pretension, motivated by a desire for status or power. Alvesson and Sköldberg say:

Social science is conceived as moralizing towards the everyday world of the social actors: 'We, the social scientists, know better.' It is thus being assumed that abstract categories are superior to the actors' own knowledge. The ethnomethodologists hold that such is not the case. (2009, p. 78)

In trying to sit in between science (which emphasises objectivity) and ethnomethodology (which emphasises subjectivity), clearly the risk is of falling between two stools. Instead, as discussed in section 6.5, the claim of this research is one of paradox.

Finally, *action research*. This research has embraced action and involvement – for example in Project Four my decision to charge a commercial fee and take the risk of losing the research opportunity, rather than offering to work *pro bono*. Perhaps the most important type of research in which involvement is an important stake is action research. In my experience it is the kind of involved research of which human resource practitioners are most commonly aware. Alongside it stands the kind of involved social science advocated by Flyvbjerg (2001). Alvesson's recommendation of 'at home ethnography' is quite opposite: he wants individuals to notice and research events in which they participate in ordinary working life, but to 'step back' and try to avoid being carried along in the flow of interaction (2009, p. 160). It is the logic of practice, under the demands of the game which will not simply reveal itself to the actor in quiet reflection which is an important stake for me.

Action research emphasises an involved researcher working co-operatively with people in a situation under study. Action research is concerned to give those individuals voice, to apply knowledge in collaboration with them to achieve improvements in their situation (as well as gains in knowledge). A classic statement is provided by Reason and Bradbury (2001) and it is further explored by Marshall and Eikeland (Marshall & Reason, 2007) (Eikeland, 2007).

Trying to grapple with involved research, I found Marshall and Reason's description of an 'attitude of inquiry' of some help. However action research tends to reach for a large system which the researcher, albeit within it, tries to embrace and within which certain values such as co-operation are held to be self-evident goods. By contrast this research has questioned systems thinking and highlighted the significance of conflict and challenge.

I found particularly illuminating Eikeland's way of thinking about the 'researcher-knower' and the 'researched-known' becoming one and the same, 'suspending' the division of labour between them (2007, p. 351). In this research the researcher-knower and the researched-known are one individual. However Eikeland's analysis does not describe my experience well. I read him as suggesting that when researcher and researched are the same individual, the distance between the two must collapse. It did not feel like that to me. Sometimes in re-thinking my experience, the tension between the roles was exhausting, occasionally painful. I would rather say that as researcher and researched (say, interviewer) I am engaged in two distinct games with different *habitus*. I would describe the tension between them as somatised rather than collapsed.

## Chapter Seven: Conclusion

In this section – to be read alongside the argument in section 6.1 of the synopsis - I suggest the contribution of this research.

Two sources previously cited capture particularly clearly the state of both research and ‘good practice’ in senior selection interviewing. Firstly, Schmitt and Chan (1998). Neal Schmitt was a former editor of the *Journal of Applied Psychology* and President of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology. Writing with David Chan, they point to the dominance of the scientific (measurement) paradigm by opening with these words:

Personnel selection research has been conducted for most of the twentieth century .... This research has followed the [following] general paradigm .... The job for which individuals will be chosen is examined to determine what tasks and responsibilities will be required. This specification of the domain of job tasks is followed by the generation of hypotheses concerning the knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics (KSAOs) required of individuals who must perform these tasks. Specification of the tasks and KSAOs leads to the development of measures of both job performance variables and predictor variables and evaluation of the hypotheses about ability-performance relationships proposed during the job analysis phase of the project. Assuming some confirmation of these hypotheses, various steps are taken to implement the selection procedures and to assess their practical costs and benefits in an organizational context.

This basic paradigm appropriately underlies good personnel selection or staffing research. (Ibid., pp. 1-2)

Schmitt & Chan go on to introduce four practical examples. The first three concern the selection of entry-level investigators in a US law enforcement agency (about 300 from 10,000 applicants); the use of a multi-aptitude test battery in another federal agency ‘to select applicants into a large number of agency jobs’; and the selection of emergency telephone operators in a small city (ibid., pp. 12, 13, 20, 26). This is selection at frontline or middle levels.

The fourth example is at a senior (in American parlance, 'executive') level – the selection of a single vice president for human resources. The authors say:

... This practice is usually called individual assessment. Because this selection practice is rarely, if ever, described in research reports, we have constructed an ideal example of an individual assessment based on the selection model presented at the beginning of this chapter ... . (Ibid., p. 33)(emphasis added)

Thus, having just emphasised the rarity of live research material in senior selection, the authors present a single case study which is fictionalised. Nor do any of their 11 key 'research issues for the future' (ibid., p. 293) call for repair of this research gap; possibly they resigned themselves to the difficulty of access, confidentiality and getting sufficient numbers at senior levels for scientific research.

The second is Hollenbeck, writing reflectively on a long career as an industrial-organisational psychologist and as an executive (2009, p. 130). His focus is senior selection. He bemoans the lack of research material (ibid., p. 141) and the 'uncomfortable truth' that industrial-organisational psychologists are 'largely absent from the table' when senior selection decisions are made (ibid., p. 134). He argues:

That we get no respect and don't have a seat at the table are symptoms, not the cause of our problems. Nobody is buying because we don't have much to sell. This is not a marketing problem; our traditional psychometric selection model has led us down the wrong paths. (Ibid., p. 140)

... Our field has stuck with our classical personnel selection model, seeking to correlate predictors with criteria, hoping for large samples. We do this even though it continues to disappoint us in terms of research, results, or respect. Our model is so thoroughly ingrained in all of us that we keep hoping that the right set of predictors and criteria and a large enough  $N$  will (finally) produce the results we seek. (Ibid., p. 138)

Hollenbeck courageously describes a stuck practice and calls for help. He proposes as changes to unstuck the practice that the question of senior selection should be reframed as a broader one in 'decision making and judgment' (ibid., p. 140), and that senior selection should become a focus for research, even if it might be difficult to meet some research publication criteria (ibid., p. 141).

The contribution of this research is aimed at the selection of individuals at or near board level, in which interviewing is the dominant selection technique. No inflated ideas about the power of senior individuals are needed to consider research into this practice important: if it needs demystification, that requires research. Moreover in very many organisations in varied fields, some trust that senior appointments are made *at least partly* on merit is part of our social fabric and an important source of the authority which appointment confers. Senior selection is also an arena in which many individuals aspire to achieve positions which may represent the culmination of their working lives. It is an important practice with widespread effects.

This research has noticed the practice in a new way – as stuck. It also contributes towards unsticking it. Its first step in this direction is to link the stuckness in practice to a narrowness in the associated research field. This narrowness is identified as the intellectual dominance of the scientific paradigm, which inadvertently cuts theorisation about the practice off from a wealth of wider insights. The same paradigm also shapes the ‘good practice’ offered to practitioners by books, training courses, peer example and a variety of ‘experts’.

An important mechanism of stuckness-in-practice identified in this research concerns power and politics. These are suggested to be ubiquitous features of all organisational life; but in dealing with senior roles the impact of power, however little spoken about, can rarely be avoided. This research offers reasons why scientific approaches might make little headway here.

Furthermore, scientific research requires numbers of interviewees and numbers of candidates, and some way of controlling for differences in job contents and environments. This looks nearly impossible to achieve at senior levels. A contribution of this research is to exemplify one way (among many) in which senior selection practice can be explored in the future.

This research goes beyond calling for a wider reflective conversation about senior selection practice, to supporting such a conversation by sketching a radically social

way of thinking about the practice and its idea of merit. Finally illuminating Bourdieusian practice with the help of the more widely known Weickian framework of sense-making, access to the former by managers and scholars working in English may be increased..

And in terms of practice – firstly senior selection in a broad sense, and then more personally? As to the former, some clues suggest new potential, new energy for change. It may be that the pointing out of stuckness - if this releases energy and confidence for practitioners to act differently into senior selection situations without being overawed by ‘science’ - offers the biggest potential for change, more than any of the more specific interpretations within this research. That is why in proposing some writing aimed at practitioners, I have invited a former colleague to join me in reflecting together on our experiences (and inviting our readers to do similarly): with this research figuring as one, albeit transformative, part of my experience.

For this research has been transformative for me. Three years ago I did not consider myself professionally stale: by this I meant that the affairs of candidates and clients still mattered. I still cared. But now I realise I was stuck, unable to innovate productively. When I reached the end of the selection project narrated in Project Four, I did not have any ideas about what to do differently next time: now I do. In particular I see quite direct, tangible actions which as a practitioner I would like to encourage clients to take up – ways of translating into interviewing practice the fundamental difference between merit considered objectively (as measurement) and inter-subjectively (as a ‘weak ethical gravity’). However these possible actions are not proven or established by this research; they are simply new possibilities which appear to me where none did before.

For example, final interview days for clients using panels are frequently crammed full of candidates, compressing the time for discussion and decision. This is a sensible use of time if the process were one of uncontentious measurement, as in Prince Charming’s search for Cinderella. Given a marginal hour, it is logical to spend it measuring one more candidate rather than discussing existing candidates at greater length. Now I want to suggest that panels – especially where consultants have

already done a round of thorough interviewing – should see one fewer candidate, and use the hour released for a more searching and exploratory discussion of the others.

To further shift towards an intersubjective paradigm which is more than the summation of individual whims, I would suggest an additional change. For example on each candidate, two different members might be remitted in advance to lead the panel's discussion of that candidate: one making an optimistic case (how might things be if we appointed this candidate and that turned out well) and another the converse. In the discussion panel members would need to move beyond opining their one 'right answer' – though of course, as in every aspect of life, decisions would then have to be made.

Importantly, though, this research points to strong reasons why practice may *not* change: in particular the depth of the anxieties (and vested interests) present in senior selection. The journey of this research leads me to underline the anxieties as much, if not more, than the vested interests. I have sensed, and tried to convey, something of the dimensions of our need to create and to cling to familiarity to diminish our fear of being paralysed by the unknowns involved in choosing leaders. Nor can it be known that the consequences of unsticking will on balance be 'good': gains hard-won (thanks to science) could be lost with nothing better put in their place. In that sense, the practice's stuckness does valuable work, enabling us as well as constraining us in acting into the unknown.

Finally three years ago my preference was to find new ways of earning my living: that journey into career advice remains exciting and I will continue with it, but now I am looking for a way to keep some involvement in senior selection. I also find myself in conversations exploring part-time academic possibilities.

My understanding of life and my life has changed in ways which I had never dreamed. I owe a great deal to my supervisors, Douglas Griffin and Ralph Stacey, my fellow students and other faculty on this doctoral programme, and to Bourdieu's logic of practice to which Griffin introduced me.

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