

## Australian Anthropological Society Meeting 2009

### Do we really need Bourdieu?

#### Question for 'An Anthropological Existence: Conversations with Michael Jackson'

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#### Greg Downey

Senior Lecturer in Anthropology

Macquarie University

<http://blogs.plos.org/neuroanthropology>

[greg.downey@mq.edu.au](mailto:greg.downey@mq.edu.au)

Ironically, one of the turning points in my fieldwork on the Afro-Brazilian martial art and dance, capoeira, happened after returning from the field. I continued to practice capoeira in Chicago while writing my dissertation. During one training session, I had a startling experience while doing a *bananeira*, or a capoeira handstand. As I've written about elsewhere (2008), attempting a drill I had done innumerable times, the bodily sensation of the movement shifted radically. Before that, I had largely pitched forward onto my hands, jumping off the ground with my feet, as if the right amount of force would land me in a properly balanced inverted position. In the radically different instance, however, I planted my hands and slowly lifted my feet off the ground by getting my torso in equilibrium first, then extending my legs vertically into the *bananeira*. As an instructor had tried to tell me more than a year before, when demonstrating the same handstand drill: 'Just stand up.' Suddenly, my teacher's advice, comments from expert practitioners, and things read in books about the art made sense in a completely new light, contextualized by my own physical experience.

Although the event transformed my research, I would not have been open to it without having read the work of Michael Jackson, especially 'Knowledge of the Body,' his advocacy of studying the 'intelligence of the technique,' the 'cultivation and imitation of practical skills' (1989: 134, 135). This plenary panel is a very selfish event, the price you all have to pay for me organizing the conference, a chance to talk face-to-face with a scholar whose work I've been in a conversation with since becoming a graduate student. Rereading recently 'Knowledge of the Body' was a sobering realization that many of my best arguments are unintentional paraphrasings of things Jackson had written more adeptly and published as early as 1983.

Jackson's 'Knowledge of the Body' was a *reflective* ethnography — you call it, following George Devereux, an '*informed* subjectivity' (ibid.: 135) — an approach that recognized and deployed the practical enculturation of the ethnographer as a tool for understanding unthematized, corporeal forms of culture.<sup>1</sup> This approach throws into high resolution forms of apprenticeship and learning present throughout culture and, in a sense, piggy-backed on them, crediting the ethnographer's body and senses with an openness and flexibility like our subjects'. I say 'reflective' rather than the more common 'reflexive,' though, because Jackson was ultimately not the ethnographic object in his reflection, nor was there any implied overlap of the identities of ethnographer and subject.

I could go on in this vein, but I want to cut to my equally selfish questions, asking your help to think through issues that are now on the edge of my own work:

In 'Knowledge of the Body,' you draw extensively on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, especially his theory of the *habitus* (Jackson 1989: 128). To put my question bluntly: **do we really need Bourdieu?** I ask this because, in some places, it seems you wish to distance yourself from the Bourdieu-ian project, such as his criticisms of Alfred Schutz's 'flabby humanism' (see Jackson 1996: 20); in others that you appear to recuperate Bourdieu's project, for example, by arguing it is grounded in a kind of phenomenal vacillation between feeling ourselves as subjects or objects (ibid.: 21); or at least, in other places, you suggest you seek to accomplish something distinctive from Bourdieu (e.g., 1989: 132). Much of the anthropological work on embodiment has been captured by a sociological or social metaphoric understanding of the body—we could say, body as *class-socialized* or as *symbolic schema*. But your account of embodiment is much more phenomenological, on a different, person-centred scale, built from narrative, and recognizes the way that bodily knowledge is built up through enculturation in skills and techniques.<sup>2</sup> Since so much of your work has pushed for a richer phenomenology, do you think Bourdieu's use of embodiment as a theoretical solution to fundamentally sociological questions (how classes reproduce, for example) distracts attention from phenomenological questions, such as how bodily expertise affects experience? **To put it bluntly again, at least as provocation: our field has privileged Bourdieu's approach to embodiment for more than twenty years; are we any closer to dealing with the issues you highlighted as crucial in 1983?**

Finally, I wonder about existentialism in your work, and your propensity to ask of ethnography broad, universal questions about human existence—the quandaries of

intersubjectivity, for example, in *Minima Ethnographica* (1998), where you argue that certain intersubjective contradictions recur across your field sites, and our species. Some of the passages that I find hardest to concede in your work emphasize the closeness of self and other, the shared universality of existential conundrums, and this unity of our species: ‘While words and concepts distinguish and divide, bodiliness unites and forms the grounds of an empathic, even a universal, understanding’ (135). I suspect that other anthropologists, too, may balk at this assertion, hesitate to sign on so enthusiastically.

Obviously, from my account of the bananeira, I agree that bodily understanding is an area for communication, inter-cultural sharing, and even personal change, but is the human body really universal? Is our species, in fact, marked by our bodily differences, discontinuous because of what our bodies do not share. By this, I do not mean old-fashioned assertions of irreducible racial or insurmountable sex-related inheritance, but the growing recognition in neurosciences, genetics, biological anthropology, and human morphology that differences in upbringing, activity patterns, education, environmental configuration, cognitive developmental niche — all fancy ways of talking about ‘culture’ — have physiological consequences. **That is, in light of new findings about phenotypic and neural plasticity, the crafting of physiology by developmental environment, are you still confident about the bodily unity of our species? And do we need ‘unity’ to argue that bodily apprenticeship is a route to greater ethnographic understanding?**

To close, you argue, quite cheekily: ‘If we construe anthropological understanding as principally a language game in which semiotic values are assigned to bodily practices, then we can be sure that in the measure that the people we study make nothing of their practices outside of a living, we will make anything of them within reason’ (1989: 134). As I read this, you accuse anthropologists of making a wide variety of theoretical mountains from other peoples’ everyday molehills. Guilty as charged, certainly, but alas I would thank you for directing our attention to a whole different set of molehills, and to recognizing that they are already momentous in shaping human experience.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Bloch (1998) argues something very similar, that the only reason he knows what to ask his Malagasy informants about which areas of the forest will make good fields for horticulture is that he already knows, through apprenticeship, the answers. He suggests that his interviews often amount to a kind of discursive fishing for someone to say explicitly what he knows implicitly through enculturative apprenticeship.

<sup>2</sup> Given more time, I could cite a number of fundamental differences between Jackson's account of embodiment and Bourdieu's discussion of the *habitus*. For example, Jackson highlights the fact that, 'altered patterns of body use may induce new experiences and provoke new ideas' (1989: 129), even pointing out how Kuranko initiation ceremonies make use of this transformative capacity. Bourdieu is much less convinced that habitus is subject to transformation, let alone the vehicle for cultural innovation. In addition, mimetic performance in Kuranko initiation, such as women imitating men, demonstrates the latent potential in each person's habits to perform with hexis that are alien to their identities, a capacity that bubbles into performance given the right circumstances to, as Jackson put it, 'periodically re-cognize the other in themselves and see themselves in the other' (ibid.: 130).