

Critical Realism for Evaluating the Impact of Postgraduate University Learning on Professional Practice

This paper argues for the ontological appropriateness (Healy & Perry, 2000) of critical realism for evaluating the impact of postgraduate, university based learning on the workplace based practices of professionals. I start by reporting the findings of a meta-synthesis of empirical studies with regards to conceptualising 'impact on professional practice' (IoPP) and an overview of the theoretical frameworks previously employed to research IoPP. In doing so, I highlight a gap in the literature indicating that while widely used by other disciplines to investigate impact in other fields (e.g. by sociology, criminology, economics or marketing for public health or safety interventions, IT systems or advertising), within education, critical realism has until now been predominantly applied to evaluating learning experiences within the learning context, (e.g. Wong, Greenhalgh & Pawson, 2010; Ambrose & Ker, 2014), rather than evaluating education's impact on professional practice in the workplace. With the aim of stimulating participants to consider the potential applicability of these ideas to educational research, and the challenges that might arise, I go on to demonstrate that educational provision can arguably be conceptualized as 'complex' (cf. Glouberman & Zimmerman, 2002; Rogers, 2008) and that realist impact evaluation methodology (cf. Pawson & Tilly, 1997; Pawson & Manzano-Santaella, 2012; Westhorp, 2014), particularly Programme Theory (cf. Rogers, 2008), can play a productive role in evaluating education's IoPP. In part, this argument rests on the critical realist rejection of Humean notions of causality in favour of understanding tendencies (cf. Outhwaite, 1998) and generative causal mechanisms (cf. Archer, 1998). While the focus of this paper is not to answer in depth the question, 'why evaluate education's IoPP?', I conclude with a summary of some important reasons for doing so. Due to word count, references are available upon request.

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