

## 6 English abstract

### Morten Nørholm: *On the social and symbolic function of evaluations of education - constructing an object*

The present dissertation is constructing the scientific object evaluation of education. Setting out from an interest in the social and symbolic function of educational evaluations and from a number of institutionalised educational evaluations, and using eight of these evaluations as an immediate object, the discussions construct the social and symbolic function of these evaluations in the reproduction of fundamentally arbitrary social relations, relations of dominance, that is, a fundamentally arbitrary social order.

The discussions show how evaluation research (normal or doxic evaluation research) should be constructed as an indispensable part of the scientific object educational evaluation: In stead of offering theories for explanation and understanding, what is categorised as evaluation research seems mainly if not only to consist of methodologies or meta-evaluations; in stead of being a relatively autonomous instance, normal evaluation research is constructed as an indispensable part of the evaluations.

The discussions in the dissertation draw upon theories and/or empirically founded theoretical work of among others Émile Durkheim (different forms of knowledge), Pierre Bourdieu (theory of fields of cultural production, sociology of practice), Gaston Bachelard (*la philosophie de 'non'*), Ulf P. Lundgren (evaluation research in a more strict scientific sense), Staf Callewaert (general theories of professional knowledge and action connected especially to the semi-professions), and others. Hence, the discussions attempt to take a strictly empirically-scientific stance different from that of normal evaluation research.

The recommendations in the evaluation of formal training of nurses seem to imply more practical theory at the cost of supervised on-the-job training and theoretical theory respectively. This seems to be a general trend. Since the recommendations seem to be countering the theories of Bourdieu on the structure and genesis of human practical action applied in the analyses, the scope of the research is to understand and explain the logic of the recommendations in stead of regarding them as counter logical. Thus, one of the starting points of the research is a question of *how* and *why* these seemingly counter logical recommendations come by, and

according to what social or symbolic function or economy. *Why* and *how* - within a sociological-pedagogical theoretical frame of explanation. This gives rise to the interest in first of all of examining and analysing the employed methods of evaluation especially regarding the implied theories of the structure and genesis of human practical action.

The dissertation is therefore containing analyses of eight educational evaluations of educations concerning eight job categories within a medical field: Midwife, nurse, home help/social worker, medical doctor, radiographer, physiotherapist, occupational therapist, and dentist. Jobs that are mostly practical. The evaluations were carried out by the Danish Centre for *Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education* and by the *Adult Education Research Group* of Roskilde University respectively. The analyses and discussions in the dissertations are focussed mainly on the method applied in the evaluations. Attempting to find theories for explanation of the function of these evaluations lead to the discussion of the function of normal evaluation research, and to the preliminary construction of a field of evaluation researchers in Denmark. However, and qua methodologies meta-evaluating the evaluations, normal evaluation research is constructed as an indispensable part of the evaluations and not as a source of explanation.

The properties of the participants in the analysed educational evaluations seem to indicate that the social relations of dominance seen in a larger scale are found within the participants in the evaluations as well. It also shows how an important condition for participating in the evaluations is never having been occupied with educational research in the form of science in a strict sense. Hence, the evaluations are more in the nature of opinion polls, registering what can be said in public, a dominant discourse, rather than containing scientific research in a strict sense. And seeming to always implying a theory of practice without a symbolic economy of human action - implying 'rational man'.

Using primarily the theories of Bourdieu of the social function of educational systems and of fields of cultural production, this leads to the construction of educational evaluations as only one evaluating or sorting step out of several steps in a sophisticated societal sorting mechanism: Normal educational research is qua meta-evaluations sorting educational evaluations, sorting formal educations, sorting students. Describing the findings as a system for sorting seems hardly controversial: Any methodology seem to contain suggestions to the improvement of the treated methods, any evaluation seems to present suggestions to the improvement of the object of the evaluation, any school or formal training seem

to imply some kind of sorting. What might be controversial is that the research in the dissertation is indicating that the sorting actions are performed so that the sorting reproduces already existing social differences. Not as a stipulated intention, since the aim never was to discuss intentions, but as the reconstruction of an objectivated function of the system of evaluation, and of evaluation research.

After examining the positions of four dominant Danish evaluation researchers (doing normal or doxic evaluation research), the preliminary construction of a field of producers normal (doxic) Danish evaluation research was carried out. And it is argued that the structure of this preliminary field corresponds to the structure of a field of producers of evaluation research in general. However, the *doxa* of this apparent field is not produced by evaluation research itself but stems from an administrative field, indicating that the preliminary (sub)field of normal evaluation researchers is not a relatively autonomous field in the sense of Bourdieu. In stead, the apparent (sub)field of producers of evaluation research is constructed as part of a political or an administrative field, and as such the research and the evaluations are functioning as political instruments for planning of educational system, taking a fundamentally arbitrary political stance: Normal evaluation research is produced within a decidedly non-autonomous part of an administrative field, a field of power

However, this does not imply - normatively - arguing against this special kind of (social or political) research. Normal evaluation research is a highly specialised kind of research in its own right and used under particular circumstances as shown in the dissertation. However, these circumstances seem never to be set out explicitly, adding normality to the strength of the evaluation research as a symbolic capital. In turn this shows how the researchers as well as the research can be so powerful by functioning as if nothing was functioning, function-free. Pointing at this particular point argues that when research functioning as political instruments is allocated in a field recognised as relatively autonomous (at a university), this adds strength to a fundamentally arbitrary political stance. As a consequence, the allocation of political work to a scientific field seems to jeopardise the legitimacy of the work of a scientific field, or in other words that there is a risk that the relative autonomy to which the fundamentally arbitrary political stance owes its strength, is jeopardised. Seemingly, this is happening at the cost of scientific work or science in a strict sense.