

**ON THE SOCIAL AND SYMBOLIC FUNCTION  
OF EVALUATIONS OF EDUCATION**

**Morten Nørholm: PhD Thesis**

**Recommendation concerning the defence of the thesis  
by the Assessment Committee:**

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## Introduction

Morten Nørholm's thesis *On The Social and Symbolic Function of Evaluations of Education: Constructing an Object* was submitted on June 19, 2007, to The Danish School of Education, University of Aarhus. On August 6, 2007, in accordance with §16 of Ministerial Order no. 114 of March 8, 2002, and following the recommendation of the Department of Educational Sociology, the Academic Council authorised an assessment committee consisting of the following members:

- Linda Andersen, Associate Professor, Roskilde University Centre, Denmark
- Karin Anna Petersen, Senior Associate Professor, University of Uppsala and Visiting Professor, Kristianstad University College, Sweden
- Søren Langager (Chairperson), Senior Lecturer, The Danish School of Education, Denmark

## Structure and Content of the Thesis

The thesis, which is written in Danish, is 182 pages long. Additionally, it contains a Table of Contents, a Preface, a three-page Abstract in English an extensive list of references of 15 pages in all, and three appendices.

The focus of the thesis is on the social and symbolic function of evaluations of education. A selection of educational evaluations is investigated and analysed with the purpose of constructing from a social point of view the circumstances under which these evaluations are established. The purpose is to construct the social and symbolic function of these educational evaluations, which in consequence of the approach taken by this research is more comprehensive than what the actual evaluations say about themselves – for example, that they are supposed to assess and stipulate the value/quality of something, seeing the evaluation as a product of these stipulations.

The thesis thus aims to construct a social theory of educational evaluations and contributes thereby to educational-sociological knowledge within the field of higher education. In this way it differs from work which is constructed and characterised as "*normal evaluation research*", which tends to focus on meta-evaluative concerns and on formulating of theories *for* evaluations, methodologies etc, or to take part itself in concrete evaluations.

The thesis consists of five main sections. A preface is followed by *Chapter 1*, 'On the focus of the thesis and the choice of theoretical frame of reference'. Here a thoroughgoing account is given of the focus and academic ambition of the thesis, of the reasons for choosing or rejecting theoretical approaches, and of empirical case-study fields: evaluation reports on study programmes at different levels within the medical/healthcare oriented field, from basic social and health care assistant and worker training programmes to graduate medical programmes.

As mentioned previously, the ambition of this thesis is to substantiate a theory of educational evaluations, hereby providing a theoretical explanation for the widespread presence of educational evaluations and the underlying evaluation research, and to reveal "*The social consequences of conducting and/or deciding to conduct an evaluation, and the symbolic function which the completed or planned evaluations have for these social consequences*" (p.1): an evaluation practice.

With this approach to educational evaluations and with the research interest oriented towards theories with something to say about the social distribution of different forms of practical (occupational) skills, and more broadly, about the sorting of pupils which goes on in schools and in the education system as a whole, the primary theoretical source of inspiration was the work of Pierre Bourdieu. The choice of this theoretical approach is explained, firstly, pragmatically: the author has worked extensively with this line of theory before commencing work on the thesis; and secondly because this theoretical approach is highly appropriate and has proved to be relevant in analysis of the field of practice which educations are directed towards. In their theory of reproduction Bourdieu & Passeron propound

an apparently stable structure of unequal achievement in school. But this is not attributable to a lack of ability among the pupils/students or of communicative skills among the teachers, as is often argued.

The thesis is characterised by the author as an extension of other theses and research work within the medical/healthcare oriented semi-professional area using Bourdieu as theoretical front figure. It is, however, emphasised that the focus on educational evaluation distinguishes this from the existing research in the area.

The chapter also contains an explanation of the social and symbolic function of educational evaluation of the decision not to include other theoretical points of view. The chapter concludes with some preliminary considerations of educational evaluation and the problematic nature of the unexamined assumptions which seem characteristic hereof.

On the basis of the specifying of the theoretical framework to which the thesis makes reference and of the empirical focus (in Chapter 1), the rest of the thesis is logically divided into three main sections: Chapter 2 presents a thoroughgoing account of Bourdieu's theories, with comments; Chapter 3 presents considerations and analyses of the conceptual frame underlying evaluation and (educational) evaluation research in a general perspective; and finally in Chapter 4 the eight evaluation reports which make up the empirical case material are scrutinised and analysed.

In *Chapter 2*, "Résumé and discussion of the chosen theoretical frame of reference", Bourdieu's approach is explicated by means of an examination and consideration of the basic concepts *field*, *capital* and *habitus*, with the inclusion of original sources supplemented with interpretations of Bourdieu using especially D. Broady and S. Callewaert as references. The empirically based analyses of social sorting, power/dominance and the social and symbolic function of school and the education system are explicated in the light of Bourdieu & Passeron's *La Reproduction* (1977), and a thematic kinship is implied between that analysis and the analysis of educational evaluation which is central to Chapter 4 of the thesis.

Three further themes are considered in Chapter 2. The first consists of reflections on E. Durkheim's concepts 'art', 'theoretical theory' and 'practical theory' (theory *for* practice), on the basis of *Nature et Méthode de la Pédagogie* (1911), in which the latter concept is analysed with reference to its theoretical interplay with Bourdieu's theory of praxis (praxeology as knowledge *of* practice, not *for* practice), in order to stipulate a conceptual frame in analyses of research work on evaluation by means of Durkheim's discussion of art, practical theory and science as forms of knowledge versus Bourdieu's theory of praxis.

The next theme is a presentation of U.P. Lundgren's position in relation to scientific evaluation research, on the basis of 'Educational Evaluation. A basis for, or a Legitimation of, Educational Policy' (1979). Lundgren's theory asks us to see evaluations as events in the world which can form a basis for a theory of the social and symbolic function of evaluation; that is, a scientific theory *of* evaluation rather than a meta-evaluating theory *for* evaluation. Here Lundgren's position is highlighted as a critical approach to evaluation research and as a source of inspiration for the analyses presented later in the thesis, since Lundgren points out that evaluation research and different evaluations are presented as if they were scientific advances whereas they actually reflect the objective social function of educational programmes and the State's need to legitimise political decisions.

The third theme is broached at the end of the chapter with reflections on the author's partly habitual choice of theoretical approaches to the fundamental theme of the thesis with reference to Bourdieu's reflections on this issue (*Homo Academicus*, 1988). An outline is briefly presented of an auto-socio analysis with reflections on the author's own extraction and 'acquired dispositions', leading to the PhD research. This short account is developed further in an appendix (10 pages).

*Chapter 3*, 'What is understood by evaluation and evaluation research respectively?' is the longest section of the thesis. Here the focus changes from the establishing of theoretical frames in Chapter 2 to

the identification, description and analysis of texts dealing with evaluation and evaluation research, with the aim of revealing the preconception of these topics.

The chapter is divided into two sections. The first is more lexically oriented: it examines the definition and conceptualisation of the term 'evaluation' in a number of national and international dictionaries, lexica and encyclopaedias, with *The International Encyclopedia of Education* (Húsen and Postlethwaite eds, 1994) in a central position. The second section presents a thematic analysis of selected texts published by four Danish evaluation researchers regarded as representative of Danish evaluation research: Erik Albæk, Finn Hansson, Hanne Foss Hansen and Peter Dahler-Larsen.

The categories from Chapter 2 (practical theory, science, doxa etc) are integrated in this section's considerations, and as the analyses of the selected texts unambiguously indicate, the absence of thematisation of and reflection on the presence of evaluations and their symbolic and social function in a scientific frame of reference, the term (concept) 'normal evaluation research' is analysed and constructed, seeing the texts as exponents of the doxa of evaluation research. On the basis of this a preliminary analysis and construction is carried out of the (sub)-field of producers of evaluation research in Denmark – as a sub-field in a political-administrative field, the field of power, and in this sense a non-autonomous (sub)-field, through which the field is objectivated, whilst the thesis positions itself within a field of (scientific) research *on* evaluation research.

*Chapter 4*, 'Résumé and analysis of selected parts of the reports on eight educational evaluations', is a case study of eight evaluations of training programmes within the medical/health care field carried out from 1994 to 1998 by the Evaluation Centre (EC; now known as the Evaluation Institute/EVA) and The Adult Education research Group (EVU) at Roskilde University respectively. These evaluations are made the object of description, analysis and discussion of the formal frames: aims, evaluation methods, management etc. This analysis is supplemented with a Bourdieu-inspired investigation of the educational backgrounds, professional positions etc of the evaluation informants with the purpose of determining who in such educational evaluations are assigned the greatest significance as exponents of the 'quality' of the educational programme, and is therefore encouraged to suggest possible changes of the training programme. Applying this twofold analytical approach, the thesis aims to indicate the social and symbolic functions of such educational evaluations seen through the lens of Bourdieu's theories.

The thesis is rounded off with a seven-page 'Final Discussion and Conclusion', in which the threads are gathered together and put into a perspective suggesting that the characteristics indicated in relation to educational evaluation may be assumed to be generally valid of all institutionalised evaluation.

### **The evaluation of the Assessment Committee**

The thesis gets off to a good start: Morten Nørholm formulates a consistent introduction, whilst Chapter 2 (Bourdieu, Durkheim and Lundgren) contains solid and informative theoretical sections. It is a reflected and clearly presented epistemological point of departure in which Bourdieu and his concepts of field, habitus and capital are central, which gives strength to Morten Nørholm's work process: the thesis builds on extensive empirical and theoretical work. Morten Nørholm demonstrates how the State's interest in evaluation and evaluation research can be understood empirically and theoretically, and presents good epistemological structural analyses on the basis of the chosen Bourdieu approach. Light is shed by these means on the symbolic (and social) function of the educational evaluations which take place directly or indirectly under the auspices of the State, and the thesis thus has a perspective for most types of evaluation. The point of departure here is 'normal evaluation research', the dominant *doxa*, which Morten Nørholm has explicated using methods implying a break with the traditional ways of discussing these matters. Employing Bourdieu's theory as instrument, it becomes apparent that the activity designated as evaluation research is problematic as it never breaks with the presen-

tations and self-presentations of the agents but accepts them at their face value and merely relates to the dominant doxa.

The case analysis of educational evaluations conducted in the medical/healthcare oriented field is founded on empirical material from the mid-1990s and establishes which agents are involved in evaluations conducted within the aegis of the State. The analysis indicates that they are rarely persons with a professional understanding of education, evaluation and evaluation research, let alone the ability to objectify their own area and its practices; rather they tend to be leading agents within their professional group and positioned relatively high in the administrative and political hierarchy but they are not necessarily experts in their field. It is an interesting analysis of the work of the EC and EVU groups, in which Morten Nørholm succeeds in demonstrating that educational evaluation, with the selected evaluations as examples, are not able to get behind the structural forces which underpin them. The analysis of all eight educational evaluations demonstrates empirically the points that were discussed and analysed theoretically earlier in the thesis, with Bourdieu as the dominant reference and theoretical instrument: the administrative and bureaucratic echelons of the field of power – the State apparatus – pervade and control both evaluation and evaluation research, whether they are conducted in special analysis institutions or at a selected university.

The thesis is an important contribution to a comprehensive analysis of educational evaluation within the educational-sociological sphere and offers critical analyses in relation to the present growing societal tendency to evaluation praxis, evidence-basing and quality indicators. But as the thesis demonstrates, the development of 'normal educational evaluation research' cannot be solely related to the latest political developments, nor be regarded as a contribution to the realisation of the ideology that education should be equally available for everyone. The thesis confirms that evaluation and evaluation research also play a part in what is demonstrated by Bourdieu & Passeron: it is not the case that there are equal opportunities for everyone; and the education system systematically sorts its pupils/students in line with a social division of labour; this, however, is presented to the students' viewpoint as individual choice based on skill and intelligence and to the teachers' viewpoint as based on their communicative competence or lack of the same.

The concluding discussion in Chap. 5 draws together in a few pages the multifaceted empirical elements and theoretical analyses of the thesis; and as it is called for in the Bourdieu reception, Morten Nørholm also strives to present the place from which he himself is speaking, thus developing an auto-socio analysis which is further expounded in the appendix.

The overall impression of the thesis is that it is well-grounded on both the empirical and the theoretical level. Even though the theoretical text is not excessively dominant the thesis makes demands on the reader: its form is condensed, and it is apt to construct its own 'logic of presentation', which gives rise to questions concerning the selection of empirical material and the rationale behind it.

With regard to the consideration of lexical and encyclopaedia texts in Chapter 3, it would have been helpful if Morten Nørholm had more clearly presented his selection criteria. A great number of texts are available, and it is specified in the chapter that only "selected" Danish dictionaries, Nordic and English/French lexica, examples of international encyclopaedias and atlases etc. have been consulted; but the selection criteria is not obvious. Similarly, the criteria for deciding on the analytical approach for the text-archaeological work could have been discussed at greater length.

Together with the analysis of the four 'dominant' producers of Danish evaluation research, the selected lexical and encyclopaedia source texts become exponents the doxa of 'normal evaluation research', in which the focus of the thesis on reflections on and theories of the social and symbolic function of educational evaluation are characterised as absent. Lundgren is included as the sole dominant exponent of such a theory *of* evaluation; albeit Lundgren occupies a central position in the field; but in the light of the almost explosive expansion in the application of evaluation and evaluation research over almost the last two decades it would have strengthened the thesis's pervasive emphasis on

the absence of scientific research in the phenomenon (educational) evaluation, both nationally and internationally, if this matter had been thematised more systematically.

With regard to the empirical cases (educational evaluations) discussed in Chapter 4, a more explicit account of why these particular examples were chosen would have been enlightening, especially seen in the light of the fact that they were all conducted in the mid-1990s and that seven of the evaluations are cut to precisely the same pattern and conducted by the same evaluation institution.

Finally, it is praiseworthy that Morten Nørholm presents the place from which he himself is speaking, and has composed an auto-socio analysis; but the intention is hampered, firstly, by its being placed in an appendix, and secondly by its not being applied in a reflective analysis of how the position of the construction of the analytical object and the subsequent analyses are related to the points of the auto-social analysis.

## **Conclusion**

On the basis of the assessments and remarks detailed above, the overall conclusion is that Morten Nørholm's thesis provides new empirical knowledge within the area of educational evaluation and educational-evaluation research. Particularly meritorious is the framing of the theoretical perspectives of Bourdieu, Durkheim and Lundgren on the distinction of forms of knowledge, conceptualisation and explanations of agents' social practices, and the contribution to the (re)establishment of a scientific approach to the phenomenon educational evaluation. To this can be added the archaeological work of describing and analysing lexical data, selected front figures within the area of evaluation and evaluation research in Denmark, and around the chosen cases of evaluation.

It is a political idea that education should be able to change social reproduction. Morten Nørholm demonstrates in his thesis that it isn't as simple as that: his analysis of the prevailing self-presentation of the (sub)-field of educational evaluation reaches the conclusion that education and the corresponding educational evaluations are inscribed in and become part of the mechanism of reproduction which already exists in society, and therefore also in the education system and the conventional evaluations.

With its theoretical viewpoint, in particular its weaving together of Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital and habitus with empirical accounts and analyses, Morten Nørholm's thesis makes a contribution to the understanding and explanation of contemporary circumstances. It will take a further (research) contribution to generate models designed more explicitly to bring about changes in the symbolic and social function of educational evaluation by breaking with the prevailing self-presentation of the (sub)-field of educational evaluation, thereby giving further reasons for the necessity of creating space and frames for scholarly analyses within the area.

It is the Assessment Committee's assessment that this thesis meets a standard which enables it to be submitted for public defence.

## **The defence**

The defence of the thesis was held on 25 January 2008 and was found to be satisfactory. The Assessment Committee unanimously recommend herewith that Morten Nørholm should be awarded the PhD degree.

Date      Date      Date

Linda Andersen  
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Søren Langager (Chairperson)  
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