Elina Pekkarinen

Finnish Youth Research Network

Symposium: Can we get close to reality? Critical realism and empirical research in social work

This presentation gives an example of how critical realist approach can be applied in empirical social work research. It is based on a research project, which aims at developing Roy Bhaskar's idea of position-practice -system to a positioning model that could be applied as an analytical tool in social work research and practice. Position is defined as a point of convergence of agency and structure, in which an individual is defined by the dynamic social relations. This presentation illustrates one part of the research, which uses child protection care decisions as an empirical data for analyzing positions. Thus the study contributes not only to the theoretical discussion, but produces practical knowledge of the care decisions in child protection as well.

The data of the study consists of child protection case files of children that were taken into care in two Finnish cities during a period of six months in the larger (n=22), and eight months (n=15) in the smaller in year 2013 (n=37). The case files consist of out-of-home-care decisions, other social work decisions, child protection care plans and summaries of the children from the beginning of their clienthood in child protection agencies. At the moment of taking into care, almost half of the children (n=17) were 16 to 17 years old.

The study analyses, how the positions of the children in different communities and institutions, such as families, peer groups, and day care or school institutions, are described in the child protection documents. It shows how the positions of children change in the different social contexts in the different phases of the process. Due to the two-fold nature of the documents - illustrating and constructing reality - the analysis also seeks to find out, how the positions of children vary in different child protection documents. Primary analysis implicates that the positions of children vary significantly not only in different social contexts, but in different phases of the process, and in the different documents written in the process as well. This observation underlines the importance of developing a theoretical tool for qualitatively analyzing the positions of human agents in various social situations.

Key concepts: Critical realism, position, child protection.