



Aalborg Universitet

AALBORG UNIVERSITY  
DENMARK

## Critique in social work research

*Arguments for a synthesis between critical realism and German critical theory*

Juul, Søren Rudbæk; Ringø, Pia

*Published in:*

Revitalising Critical Reflection in Contemporary Social Work Research, Practice and Education

*DOI (link to publication from Publisher):*

[10.4324/9781003248057-3](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003248057-3)

*Creative Commons License*  
CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

*Publication date:*

2022

*Document Version*

Accepted author manuscript, peer reviewed version

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Juul, S. R., & Ringø, P. (2022). Critique in social work research: Arguments for a synthesis between critical realism and German critical theory. In C. F. Svensson, & P. Ringø (Eds.), *Revitalising Critical Reflection in Contemporary Social Work Research, Practice and Education* (pp. 24-37). Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003248057-3>

### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal -

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at [vbn@aub.aau.dk](mailto:vbn@aub.aau.dk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

# Critique in social work research: arguments for a synthesis between critical realism and German critical theory

Søren Rudbæk Juul [0000-0002-905/7729](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-905/7729) and Pia Ringø [0000-0002-0494-4602](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0494-4602)

## Abstract

This chapter claims that researchers wishing to contribute to critical reflection on social work must produce deep knowledge about the generative mechanisms that create social problems and the need for social intervention. Further, it will be argued that a critical science that wants to participate in the struggles for convictions must also be able to make moral judgements about the state of society. Even if representatives of critical realism agree with the latter, the contribution from this school of thought to the development of a normatively founded critical science unfolds on a very general metatheoretical or programmatic level. For this reason, we will explore a methodological alliance between critical realism and German critical theory.

## Introduction

This chapter claims that researchers wishing to contribute to critical reflection must produce deep knowledge about the generative mechanisms that create social problems and the need for social intervention (Bhaskar 1978, Collier 1989, Archer 1995, Danermark et al. 2001, Ringø 2013). Further, it will be argued that a critical science that wants to participate in the struggles for convictions must also be able to make moral judgements about the state of society. Even if representatives of critical realism agree with the latter (e.g., Sayer 2006, 2011), the contribution from this school of thought to the development of a normatively founded critical science unfolds on a very general metatheoretical or programmatic level. For this reason, we will explore a methodological alliance between critical realism and German critical theory (Habermas 1981, Honneth 1995).

## Dialogue between researchers from different schools of thought

The authors of this anthology all hold the view that social work research must contribute to critical reflection. It must do away with myths and show the historical processes that have made social work what it is today. It must shed light on the problematic consequences of practical interventions and social-political actions, and it must give voice to marginalised groups and contribute to social change.

The prioritisation of these critical aims differs among the authors, however. Critical reflection in social work research is dependent on the researcher's view of social problems and the researcher's scientific and philosophical perspectives. Is the main aim of critique to measure the effect of various interventions and methods and thus contribute to best practice (Petticrew & Roberts 2006)? Or is the central critical aim to deconstruct dominant thinking and practices and trace their historical roots through detailed genealogical research (Dean 1999, Rose 1989)? Is the aim of critique to move beneath superficial categorisations, problem definitions, and interventions to explore underlying mechanisms that explain the emergence of social problems (Bhaskar 1978)? Or does critique exist to show that things are not good as they are, and to identify social pathologies in contemporary society, in social policy, and in social institutions and practices (Honneth 1995, 2007)?

These questions are controversial in social work research, and the dialogue between researchers from different schools of thought is sometimes absent. This chapter discusses how research can integrate various approaches and forms of knowledge to deliver a sustainable critique of the mechanisms producing social problems in contemporary societies. It does so with reference to various traditions in the social sciences, especially critical realism and critical theory. The critical realistic philosophy offers analytical strategies to move beneath phenomena as they immediately appear and create a deeper understanding of mechanisms that produce human suffering, exclusion, marginalisation, or social pathologies.

However, describing something as a social pathology presupposes normative concepts, that is, concepts of the most fundamental prerequisites for a good life and social justice. Even if representatives of critical realism may agree with this (Sayer 2011), this school of thought has not developed a coherent theory that can serve as the normative foundation of critical analyses. In that regard, the scarcity of dialogue between critical realism and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School is remarkable. The latter has always been preoccupied with the task of elaborating upon and giving reasons for normative concepts, that may function as an ethical/normative corrective to society's

development, e.g., Habermas' ideal of a communicative action freed from power (Habermas 1981, 1990) and Honneth's ideal of recognition (Honneth 1995). This article, therefore, attempts to integrate and synthesise elements of critical realism and critical theory in the version of Axel Honneth.

## **Critical realism and its ambition to create knowledge of mechanisms beneath the empirical surface**

The inspiration from critical realism implies a sceptical attitude toward a strong individualistic and solution-orientated approach in social work research as well as in social practice, which in our view represents one form of knowledge and excludes other forms of knowledge and critical reflection.

This, for example, is seen in the hunt for evidence-based knowledge, which currently unites politicians, leaders, front-line workers, and researchers in a common effort to improve fidelity, standardisation, and consistency in the enforcement of methods and practices to ensure a productive outcome, value for money, effectiveness, and quality of social work (Petticrew & Roberts 2006).

The concept of evidence-based research is rooted firmly in instrumental reason, which puts more emphasis on the effects of specific methods than on the problems and aims that these methods address. This may divert attention from the generative mechanisms, the aetiology of disease, and the advancement of our knowledge about human suffering as a bio-psycho-social phenomenon; instead resulting in descriptive categorisation of symptoms and symptom treatment (Ringø 2016, 2013). When phenomena in the diagnostic practice and the randomised experiments of evidence research (RCT) are described and explained independent of context, it is often impossible to understand the often complex and interrelated mechanisms which in the specific context generate a particular phenomenon, regardless of whether the phenomenon concerns mental health problems, social problems, or observed effects of specific interventions (Ringø 2018, 2013).

Leading evidence researchers claim that they contribute to critical reflection and better practice by clarifying what works or does not work in social work (Vedung 2017), and we shall not deny that this may be the case. Yet, it is our view that the evidence movement, which reflects much wider shifts in norms and values (Juul 2013), has promoted superficial documentation of effects that do not provide in-depth knowledge, regardless of whether the matter of concern is an explanation for social problems or clarification of why certain methods seemingly work better than

others (Ringø 2018, 2013). Basically, we are dealing with an input/output model that tries to measure the effects of a given intervention but does not really explain how the results emerge (the so-called black box problem) (Pawson & Tilly 1997, Salter & Kathari 2014).

Critical realism attempts to dig beneath the surface and elaborate theories about hidden causal (generative) mechanisms. It is inspired by Marx (1978), who believed that a critical theory about capitalism should go beyond distorted empirical manifestations to discard alienation and identify the mechanisms that explain capitalist dynamics. This ambition of providing knowledge about generative mechanisms, critical realists have inherited from Marx, but in critical realism, it is embodied in a general epistemological endeavour, that not only concerns analyses of capitalism: the general aim of science is, according to critical realists, to identify forces and mechanisms beneath the empirical level that explain reality.

According to critical realism, these generative mechanisms exist at different strata (e.g., the biological, the psychological, the neurological, the social and the societal), and each stratum contains relatively independent (emergent) forces and mechanisms (Bhaskar 1978, Danermark et al. 2001). Mechanisms from different strata interact, and whether a specific mechanism results in certain events (e.g., social problems or mental disease) depends on the context and is thus contingent. Thus, the outcome of a generative mechanism must be understood as a possibility and is never determined in advance (Ringø 2012, 2013).

The task of social science is to clarify how diverse mechanisms function and assert themselves in a complicated interplay with other mechanisms. To do this, creative and integrative research models are needed as well as interdisciplinary approaches (Ringø 2016).

Critical realism is based on a realist ontology and claims, contrary to constructivist perceptions, that one must distinguish between two dimensions of reality: the transitive and the intransitive (Bhaskar 1978, Danermark et al. 2001). The transitive dimension contains our knowledge of the world, that is, theories, concepts, models, data, etc. that exist at a particular point in history. Knowledge creation is, therefore, a historical process and human activity. Yet science creates knowledge about something, and this something is the intransitive dimension consisting of the objects that science attempts to produce knowledge about. The two dimensions cannot be conceived of as identical nor can they be reduced to each other. Reality exists, but our knowledge of reality can never claim to be an objective representation or a mirror of reality. However, this does not change the fact that science has a truth-seeking

objective and must do its utmost to come as close to the intransitive dimension of reality as possible in its effort to ensure that the ‘map corresponds to the terrain’.

Roy Bhaskar, who is often considered the founder of the critical realistic school, distinguishes between three ontological domains: (1) the empirical domain (what we can experience directly or indirectly), (2) the actual domain (events that take place whether we experience them or not, and (3) the domain of the generative mechanisms (the real existing forces which produce events and make things happen) (Bhaskar 1978). Critical realism thus draws a picture of reality that contains, in addition to the empirical domain and the domain of the events, a deep and unobservable domain. According to Bhaskar, an ontological gap exists between the three domains.

The task of science is to provide deep and integrated knowledge about the mechanisms that hide beneath the empirical surface, i.e., to construct a connection between what we observe empirically, what happens, and what makes things happen. However, since the effect of generative mechanisms is contingent and depends on the context, the task of science is not merely to elaborate theories of generative mechanisms. The aim is also to examine how the mechanisms interact and work together in specific contexts and produce different results depending on the context.

This again opens collaboration between different scientific approaches and disciplines.

In ‘constructivism and realism in exemplary method’ (2016), Ringø describes the importance of critical reflection as an openness toward a variety of scientific approaches if the analytical aim is to understand and explain complex social, human, and societal conditions. Isolated methods most likely lead to reductionistic interpretations, concepts, and descriptions. Ringø shows how an exemplary methodology is possible that neither dismisses concepts such as discourse, meaning, culture, and interpretation nor objective conditions such as structure, causality, and depth (Ringø 2018, 2016). Such methodology integrates the intersection of structural grand theories with people’s worlds of experience and opens a door to cooperation with scientific schools that take interest in people’s worlds of experience and their interactions (e.g., phenomenology, hermeneutics, and interactionism).

To understand social work, one must be interested both in the structures and discourses that frame practice, in the experiences, judgement, or habitus of social workers, and in user narratives and experiences. There will always be an element of interpretation in the social sciences, and in our view, it is difficult to see that critical realists’ understanding of the interplay between structure and agency should differ markedly from the view of hermeneutics (Gadamer 2004).<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, hermeneutics concerns itself more with people’s historical ‘being in the world’ than with hidden mechanisms and structures, but in emphasising the importance of history and that knowledge is bound

to time and space, hermeneutics holds the view – in line with critical realists – that people do not shape anything out of nothing.

In our perspective, the central socially relevant task of critical social science is to clarify how individuals historically reproduce and transform their world within frames and bonds that are themselves the products of the actions of former generations (Berger & Luckmann 1991). In the context of social work research, this is an agenda emphasising that science must uncover the often-complex and interacting mechanisms which generate social problems, as well as certain forms of interventions in practice. It must search for in-depth knowledge, taking interest in historical transformations and in the way social work is shaped through struggles between agents in the field (professionals, service users, institutions, politicians) that always take place within specific structural, political, and historical contexts.

It is problematic that these kinds of theories are currently losing ground to superficial methodological concepts that take a context-independent and a-historical approach to complicated human problems. This does not mean that scientific knowledge about generative mechanisms is directly applicable as a guideline for practice. To know how to act in specific situations, social workers need additional kinds of knowledge. Michael Payne (1991) terms it practice-theories, while others talk about models or methods (Hutchinson & Oltedal 2002). Professionals must furthermore draw on situational awareness, their professional experiences, or their judgement (Høilund & Juul 2005; Juul 2009, 2013).

If social science is to contribute to critical reflection on social work, it must provide deep knowledge about the hidden forces and mechanisms that are at work in the field, and it must make this knowledge available to practitioners and engage in a dialogue with stakeholders about what influence research-based knowledge should have on their practice.

## **The need for a synthesis of critical realism and critical theory**

Is it sufficient that a critical science penetrates the empirical surface and elaborates theories of real existing generative mechanisms – for example, how structural inequality, poverty, and marginalisation produce mental distress in vulnerable families? Should a science that wants to call itself critical be able to make moral judgments and take a normative attitude?

In our opinion, a distinction between facts and norms (between *what is* and *what ought to be*) makes no sense. With respect to this, we are again in alignment with central representatives of critical realism (Sayer 2006, 2011), who emphasise that a critical social science needs to ask, 'why things matter to people' (Sayer 2011, 2019) to take an interest in the normative and ethical qualities that give meaning in people's lives. Here, both we and leading representatives of critical realism transcend the widespread dogma of science: that the task of science is to explain *what is* while refraining from taking a moral position on the state of society.

Historically, the dogma of value freedom occurred in connection with the attempt of logical positivism to purify science from metaphysical claims. Some of these included philosophical and normative claims, which were to be kept out of science, since they were seen as an expression of subjective feelings, and consequently had no verification method (Carnap 1979), i.e., could not be empirically tested. The role model was the English empiricist David Hume, who in his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Hume 2007) was prepared to leave everything that could not live up to the requirement for empirical evidence to the flames.

Critical realism rejected the rigid empiricism of positivism long ago, and insists on a domain of reality that cannot be observed. Recently, no less than Andrew Sayer (2006, 2011, 2019) has subsequently rejected the sharp distinction between facts and norms. According to Sayer, people live their lives in contexts that matter to them. These may be positive, contributing to human flourishing, or negative, contributing to human suffering, so if research is to produce deeper insight into everyday lives, including the effects of social interventions, it must reject the distinction between facts and norms and show interest in the good and the just:

In this chapter, I shall argue that if social science is to understand both everyday life and the work of professionals, it needs to overcome its resistance to normativity, both as part of its object of study and within its own practice or discourse. If it is to understand people and their world, it needs to take the normative dimension of life seriously, both in terms of why things matter to people, and recognize that evaluative judgements may be more or less true.

(Sayer 2006: 24)



Sayer not only holds a critical attitude towards the moral subjectivism in which modern science is historically anchored, but also towards relativism and the refusal to make moral judgements that characterise other social scientific approaches, including social constructivism. For the latter, the task of social science is not to criticise unjust or inhuman matters of society, but to problematise and question the prevailing truths. In this school of thought, truth, knowledge, and reason become relative to the agents, and there is no methodological way to move the argumentation from critical deconstruction of truths to a realist re-construction of alternatives based on knowledge of integrative mechanisms producing social problems and, social pathologies, and human suffering in contemporary civilisations. Michel Foucault has expressed his deconstructivist approach this way:

A critique does not consist in saying that things are not good the way they are. It consists in seeing on what type of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established, unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based (...) Criticism consists in uncovering thoughts and trying to change it; Showing that things are not so obvious as people believe, making it so that what is taken for granted is no more taken for granted. To do criticism is to make harder acts, which are now too easy.

(Interview, Foucault 1994:456)

We agree with Foucault that an important aspect of critical research is to outline the development in ways of thinking, including transitions of discourses in society and its institutions, but we hold that critique must do more than that. It must also be able to take a stand and comment on what is good and fair, as well as what is wrong and unfair, which presupposes normative concepts.

It is certainly correct that norms and values change and vary from culture to culture, and this is underscored by Sayer as well (Sayer 2011). This does not imply complete arbitrariness, however. Regardless of time and place, values and norms, according to Sayer, have something to do with well-being and ill-being, i.e., what generates human flourishing and its opposite: harm and suffering (Sayer 2011). Therefore, according to Sayer, it is necessary to do away with the scientific idea that it is impossible to draw conclusions from *what is* to *what ought to be*. This perception, called the naturalistic fallacy (Moore 1976), has had a colossal influence on science that extends far beyond the reaches of positivism.

We also find it in the works of Max Weber, who – in line with later social constructivists – sharply rejects the possibility of drawing normative conclusions based on scientific work (Weber 1988:149). We agree with Weber and many others that science neither can nor should have the last word on practical questions, but does this imply that science and researchers must have no opinion about anything at all? – that they must not have a view on what is good and bad social work? Does it mean that no social work technologies can be termed wrong? That no social interventions are morally better than others?

The idea of the naturalistic fallacy has historically implied a profound silence about norms and values, including views on the human being on which social science is based. This, in our view, has undermined the critical potentials, and by lacking a language about the fundamental preconditions of the good life, science has been unable to provide a justified critique of societal changes that violate human life.

The judges of The Third Reich are no exception. Positivism in jurisprudence implied that their responsibility was to manage the legal order with the best legal methods, and not to make judgements based on random value judgements. This is one reason why jurisprudence could turn a blind eye to the crimes against humanity.

It is difficult to compare social work practice with Holocaust, of course. Yet, the most horrible evil is not committed by inhuman sadists but by civilised, law-abiding officials. The ‘banality of evil’ is, according to Hannah Arendt, that it is due to sheer thoughtlessness in situations where ethical norms hold low authority (Arendt 2006, 2004). What made Holocaust possible was, in reality, modern civilisation’s one-sided emphasis on planning, governance, and rationality, and the subsequent weakening of ethics (Bauman 1989); modern positivist science with its dogma of value freedom contributed decisively to this.

In continuation of Arendt’s and Bauman’s perspective, some actions performed in relation to mentally ill and disabled people in Danish job centres may be termed ‘evil’ if they have the character of coercion and are performed out of thoughtlessness in the absence of ethical standards. In Honneth’s and our own vocabulary: because of a missing sense of the importance of recognition. Needless to say, fortunately, this is not always the case.

## **Recognition as the normative focal point for critical analyses**

Despite our support for Sayer’s ideas on a general philosophical or meta-theoretical level, we question how far these ideas bring us if the aim is to cultivate normativity in social science both as a reaction to the idea of value freedom

and as a guideline for human emancipation. The reason for this is that one cannot say that the critical realists (including Sayer) clarify and justify which normative concepts can/should be the focal point for critical analyses. Sayer is inspired by the so-called capability approach, which he sees as 'a promising way forward' (Sayer 2011:21). This approach has in the works of the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum resulted in an attempt to formulate a philosophical argument for a number of universal human core values, i.e. essentials for the good life. Nussbaum presents a list of no less than ten normative ends, which she perceives to be universal conditions for people's possibilities to do and be what they want to be (Nussbaum 2006:175). The difficulty of her (and Sayer's) approach is that the weighting of the ends is left to mere intuition. Are the listed points all equal? Is there perhaps an inner relationship between some which might be the task of social theory to clarify?

In our view, a normative theory of the preconditions for human flourishing must have the capacity to prioritise. In the following, we will use the German philosopher Axel Honneth as an analytical example. Honneth has elaborated a theory according to which recognition is the most fundamental precondition for the development of a positive self and for people's chances to lead a good life. In our opinion, it is remarkable how little attention Sayer affords this theory – and the Frankfurt School altogether. What Sayer writes about Honneth, in his otherwise inspiring book on social science, values, and ethical life, is this:

Axel Honneth's attempt to ground critical social theory in a theory of recognition which engages with the experience of disrespect, might also be taken as a variant of the theme of the critique of suffering. However, while the experience of disrespect is indeed an important form of suffering, it is doubtful that all the elements of well-being can be reduced to the denial of recognition.

(Sayer 2011:231)

Sayer is certainly right about the latter. Recognition should, in our perspective, be related to questions of mechanisms producing or enabling possible forms of recognition as fx. inequality, social justice, solidarity, support, and equal opportunities. In continuation of this critical realistic ground, the theory of recognition offers a critical perspective that is an important normative focal point of critical analyses in the present era of modernity.

The idea of the importance of recognition is normally traced back to the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, who in his early works elaborated a theory of the existential meaning of recognition (Hegel 1952, 1967, 1969). More

recent philosophers such as Charles Taylor (1975) and Axel Honneth (1995) have developed this idea. In Honneth's version of critical theory, the ideal of recognition operates as the normative basis of criticism. A society (and a social work practice) that violates the conditions of recognition for certain groups of citizens is, in light of the ideal of recognition, neither good nor just (Honneth 2007).

The current tendency to implement a 'recognition policy' with a positive and optimistic mindset looking for resources and potentials in vulnerable people may at first glance seem beautiful. In reality, it is morally dubious, as it does not recognise chance- and resource inequality due to generative mechanisms such as structural settings of poverty, illness, dysfunctional families, etc. Therefore, it does not live up to Honneth's ideal of a good and just society (Honneth 1995).

The French sociologist Alain Ehrenberg (2009) links the rise of depressive disorders in the western world with comprehensive changes in norms and values that make the achievement of recognition more difficult. According to Ehrenberg, we have put the patriarchal prohibition society behind us and today live in a society in which very little is absolutely forbidden. Yet there is much one needs to do, since recognition has become something, individuals must earn. According to Ehrenberg, they must be able to perform in all social arenas, while at the same time it is entirely uncertain, which performances will result in recognition, and which will not.

This has, according to Ehrenberg, resulted in a shift in the forms of suffering. While the most important psychiatric diagnoses in the era of 'the prohibition society' were the neuroses that arose as a reaction to society's constricting norms, the most important diagnosis of today is depression, which, according to Ehrenberg, shows that increased individual freedom may result in states of exhaustion, inadequacy, and depression.

Is the rise of mental disorders among young people in Western countries to be seen in this perspective, as a result of generative mechanisms in society, which makes it more difficult for a great number of young people to achieve recognition and develop a positive self? All people are affected by changes at the macro-level of society, including transitions of values and norms, that may work as effective generative mechanisms. When some changes especially affect young people, it is because the transition from child to adult is a conflict-filled process, in which young people are creating their identities. Therefore, especially this age group is affected by requirements of flexibility and constant movement, while at the same time, there are no clear landmarks (or too many) making it difficult to find one's way (Kelly 2006).

Even if there may be other explanations, a practice aiming to promote human flourishing should take interest in young people's chances to achieve recognition *and* question what kind of recognition young people are striving for in modern societies. Is it a lonely strive for recognition that might differ from young people's basic need for social security, solidarity, and justice? Ehrenberg is interesting in this context because he links the development in the forms of suffering to general normative transitions in society and its institutions, which makes it difficult for a growing number of people to satisfy their existential need for recognition.

As an example of a critical analysis of social work written from a recognition theory perspective, we can refer to Høilund and Juul (2005). The book is written in Danish but summarised in the article *Recognition and judgement in social work* (Juul 2009). Based on comprehensive empirical data consisting of qualitative interviews with social clients, front-line workers, leaders, and politicians in two Danish municipalities, it is demonstrated that feelings of disrespect are widespread in socially poor people's engagements with the social system. The analysis is anchored in the ideal of recognition, justified with reference to socially poor people's experiences of disrespect. When they in the interviews describe how they feel invisible and neglected within the system, it is interpreted as an appeal for recognition and as an empirical justification of the ideal, and that the feelings of disrespect are connected to dominant judgements of social institutions and work routines that collide with the ideal of recognition (Høilund & Juul 2005, Juul 2009).

## **Some objections to recognition theory – discussion and clarification**

It must be emphasised that recognition theory does not specify what recognition is in specific situations, for example, how a social worker must act in order to recognise the user, or what should be decided politically. The theory is a formal one that only says something about the most fundamental prerequisites for human flourishing (Honneth 1995). Thus, we are not dealing with a new method that guarantees good results as far as it is followed to the letter, but with an ethical theory that leaves a great deal to the judgement of the researcher or the practitioner (Juul 2009).

Of course, individuals do not become vulnerable or sick solely due to changes in the recognition structures of society. Sayer is certainly right about this. Yet, if one is willing to admit Honneth's (and Hegel's) contention that recognition in current society is an important precondition for positive identity formation, and for people to lead a

good life together with others, a recognition of the structures of society is a good place to start the critical analysis.

Likewise, recognition is an important core value in a practice aiming to promote human flourishing.

This does not mean that recognition theory (having its strength as a normative theory) explains everything. In this regard, it is important to remember a scepticism towards mono-causal explanations held by critical realism. There are many generative mechanisms that interact on different levels, and how they operate depends on context. For that reason, one and the same mechanism does not have the same consequences for all people in all situations. The consequences of new types of demands on the individual are conditioned by the individual's position in the social structure (material resources, education, personal resilience, family background, life history, support options, etc.). Critical realism emphasises the importance of uncovering this complexity.

However, the opportunity for research to contribute to critical reflection depends both on convincing analyses of what is and on the persuasive power of normative concepts. We must be able to identify the interrelated bio-psycho-social mechanisms in society and its institutions producing human suffering, marginalisation, and social problems. However, to provide deeper understanding of the human consequences, we are also in need of a theory of peoples' most existential needs. Therefore, a synthesis of critical realism and critical theory is important.

Sayer is not alone in his critique of Honneth: his theory is one-sided and therefore inadequate. The philosopher Nancy Fraser has also criticised Honneth in her opinion simplified perception of the process of emancipation and claims that his Hegel-inspired focus on recognition has displaced interest in material redistribution (Fraser 2003). Honneth, for his part, sharply rejects that he is indifferent to material inequality (Honneth 2003:111), as he emphasises that material distribution normally reveals much about the existing order of recognition, and that there are many sources of misrecognition (material, social, cultural, etc.). His point is that struggles for material redistribution and struggles for recognition are driven by the same logic and feelings of disrespect or injustice, which typically arise when groups or individuals are deprived the opportunity to achieve essential positive self-realisation.

Fraser, on the other hand, criticises the 'self-realisation paradigm' of pressing ideas of the good life over the heads of people who do not feel for them (Fraser 2003).

It is dubious whether Fraser's critique strikes Honneth, who maintains that his theory must not be seen as a universal or super historical one providing final answers to practical moral questions. Instead, the theory can be formulated in a certain historical era, in which people's feelings of injustice to a large extent are about lack of recognition:

Indeed, unlike Fraser, I am convinced that we can try to identify the experience upon which all perceptions of social injustice rest, provided we keep in mind that it will be the risky and self-evidently falsifiable result of generalizations from our own horizon of experiences. The proposal that we locate the core of such feelings of injustice in the feeling of violation of what are taken to be legitimate expectations of recognition implies a web of other social-theoretical assumptions, which together represent nothing other than an empirically based generalization of especially striking contemporary experiences.

(Honneth 2003a:246)

Inspired by Honneth, we claim that in the current era of modernity, recognition theory may be a fruitful perspective that together with critical realism may further our understanding of social pathologies and human suffering. This is why we suggest a synthesis between critical realism and critical theory: the first one holding the view that a critical social science must attempt to generate deep knowledge of society and social processes, and the second one adding a normative perspective that critical realism opens to but does not itself deliver. This synthesis we believe would be fruitful for both research and practice.

This chapter must be seen as a contribution to the ongoing struggle over convictions in social work research, not least concerning what critique is, and ought to be. We hope that the chapter may improve the dialogue between different scientific schools of thought and further critical reflection. The value of our reflections cannot be proved once and for all but must be justified communicatively and through practical studies.

## References

- Arendt, H. (2004): *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Schacken Books.
- Arendt, H. (2006): *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York. Penguin.
- Archer, M.A. (1995) *Realist Theory – The Morphogenic Approach*. Cambridge University Press
- Bauman, Z. (1989): *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Oxford. Polity Press.
- Berger, P. & Luckmann, T. (1991): *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Penguin Books.
- Bhaskar, R. (1978): *A Realist Theory of Science*. Hassocks: Harvester Press.

- Carnap, R. (1979/1935): "The rejection of metaphysics". In: *Philosophy and Logical Syntax*, pp. 9–38. New York: AMS Press.
- Collier, A. (1989): *Scientific Realism and Socialist Thought*. Harvester: Wheatsheaf.
- Danermark, B. D. et al. (2001): *Explaining Society. Critical Realism in Social Sciences*. Milton. Routledge.
- Dean, M. (1999): *Govermentality. Power and Rule in Modern Society*. London. Sage Publications.
- Ehrenberg, A. (2009): *The Weariness of the Self – Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1994): "So it is important to think. Interview". In: Janes D. Faubion & Paul Rabinow (eds.): *Michel Foucault. Power. The Essential Works*. London: The Penguin Press.
- Fraser, N. (2003): "Social justice in the age of identity politics". In: Nancy Fraser & Axel Honneth (eds.): *Redistribution or Recognition. A political-philosophical exchange*, pp. 7–109. London: Verso.
- Gadamer, H. G. (2004): *Truth and Method*. London and New York: Continuum.
- Habermas, J. (1981): *Theorie des Kommunikative Handels, Vols 1–2*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Habermas, J. (1990): "Discourse ethics: Notes on a program of philosophical justification". In: *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1952/1821): *The Philosophy of Right: The Philosophy of History*. Chicago, London and Toronto: William Benton/Encyclopædia Britannica.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1967/1802–3): "System der Sittlichkeit". In: Georg Lasson (ed.). Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1969/1805–6). *Jenaer Realphilosophie*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag.
- Honneth, A. (1995): *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Honneth, A. (2003): "Redistribution or recognition: A response to Nancy Fraser". In Nancy Fraser & Axel Honneth (eds.): *Redistribution or Recognition. A Political Philosophical Exchange*, pp. 110–197. London: Verso.
- Honneth, A. (2003a): "The point of recognition: A rejoinder to the rejoinder". In Nancy Fraser & Axel Honneth (eds.): *Redistribution or Recognition. A Political Philosophical Exchange*, pp. 237–267. London: Verso.
- Honneth, A. (2007): "Pathologies of the social: The past and present of social philosophy." In: A. Honneth (ed.): *Disrespect. The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hume, D. (2007/1748): *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



- Hutchinson, G. S. & Oltedal, S. (2002): *Modeller i socialt arbejde*. København: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Høilund, P. & Juul, S. (2005): *Anerkendelse og dømmekraft i socialt arbejde (Recognition and judgement in social work)*. København: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Juul, S. (2009): 'Recognition and Judgement in social work'. *The European Journal of Social Work*, 12(4), pp. 403–417. Routledge.
- Juul, S. (2013): *Solidarity in Individualized Societies. Recognition, Justice and Good Judgement*. New York: Routledge.
- Kelly, P. (2006): 'The Entrepreneurial Self and 'Youth at Risk': Exploring the Horizon of Identity in the Twenty-first Century'. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 9(1), pp. 17–32.
- Marx, K. (1867/1859–67): *Das Kapital*. Dietz: Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim Zentralkomitee der Kommunistischen Partei der Sowjetunion und vom Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands.
- Moore, G. E. (1976/1903): *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2006) Education and democratic citizenship. Capabilities and quality education *Journal of human development*, Vol 7, Issue 3 p. 385-395
- Petticrew, M. & Roberts, N. (2006): *Systematic Reviews in the Social Sciences. A Practical Guide*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Pawson, R. & Tilly, N. (1997): *Realist Evaluation*. London. Sage.
- Payne, M. (1991): *Modern Social Work Theory. A Critical Introduction*. London: MacMillan.
- Ringø, P. (2013): 'Does society still matter? Mental health and illness in the 21.th century'. In: A. Petersen & K. Keohane (eds.): *Social Pathologies of Contemporary Civilisation*, s. 153–175. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Ringø, P. (2016): 'Konstruktivisme og realisme i eksemplarisk metode. I *At se verden i et sandkorn: Om eksemplarisk metode*'. In: B. B. Hansen & J. H. Ingemann (eds.): Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur, s. 171–189
- Ringø, P. (2018): 'Potentiality, Development Ideals, and Realities of Social Work' In Falloy, M.A & Blad, C. *Social Welfare Responses in a neoliberal Era*, Leiden, Brill Publishers, p.182-202
- Rose, N. (1989): *Governing the Soul. The Shaping of the Private Self*. Routledge.
- Salter, K. L. & Kathari, A. (2014): 'Using realist evaluation to open the black box of knowledge. A state of the art review'. *Implementation Science*, 9, Article 115.

Sayer, A. (2011): *Why Things Matter to People. Social Science, values and Ethical Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sayer, A. (2006): Realism as a basis for knowing the world *Approaches to Human Geography, Philosophies, Theories, People and Practice* p. 106-116

Sayer, A. (2019): 'Normativity in the social sciences and professions'. In: M. Kjørstad & M. Solem (eds.): *Critical Realism for Welfare Professions*. New York Routledge.

Taylor, C. (1975): *Hegel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Vedung, E. (2017): *Public Policy and Program Evaluation*. Routledge.

Weber, M. (1988/1904): "Die Objektivität" sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis". In: Max Weber (ed.): *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, pp. 146–211. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr. (Paul Siebeck).

---

<sup>1</sup> Proponents of critical realism, including Sayer, seem to disagree, however, and reduce hermeneutics to a school occupied solely with the interpretations of actors (e.g., Sayer 2011:139). Thus, it is overlooked that in philosophical hermeneutics, actors are viewed as historical beings who are limited by time and space (or by the existing structures of a given time) (Gadamer 2004).