Understanding Student Employability Skill Development: A Critical Realist Approach (0082)

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This paper presents a critical realist approach to employability. Critical realism is primarily attributed to the work of Bhaskar (1998). However, many other authors such as Harré (1986), Ackroyd and Fleetwood (2000), Archer (1995) and Easton (2002) have made significant contributions to the development of critical realism.

Indeed, within the field of higher education Clegg argues that, "how we theorise… requires a detour into issues of epistemology and ontology" (2010:150). We therefore contend that critical realism informs and offers a suitable ontological framework and therefore a foundation for employability research. Clegg notes that "critical realist approaches are not as prevalent in higher education research as in some other disciplinary domains" (2005: 150) yet we will argue that critical realism has much to offer our understanding of how employability skills are generated by students, universities, employers and society.

Since the Dearing Report (NCHIE, 1997) employability has become a key tenant of university education (Wilton, 2008). Governments, employers and the media (Woolcock, 2014) constantly question the employability of students and call for graduates with increased employability skills (HEFCE, 2011). Additionally, there has been an increasing emphasis on attaining soft and transferable skills by universities and employers (Wilton, 2008). Thus employability is a primary focus for multiple stakeholders requiring us to understand employability from multiple perspectives.

Hence, it is not sufficient to understand just the perspective of the student, academic or employer – it is also necessary to understand the role of each key protagonist and the very societal structures that students perpetuate and enable or constrain the key agents activities. By using critical realism, as an ontological framework, the researcher is able to take into account a heterogeneous range of factors including opinions, structures and mechanisms that combine to form events. This enables the researcher to move beyond empiricism by digging deep into the research object to find the causal mechanisms of events. It is the revealing of these causal mechanisms combined with the ability to build upon existing research that allows the researcher to further our understanding of employability skills development.

Critical realism offers a stratified ontology where various entities exist. The three domains are the empirical (experience and perceptions), the actual (events and actions) and the deep (structures [sets of internally related objects], mechanisms [ways of acting], powers and relations) (Ackroyd and Fleetwood 2000: 13). Causal powers are also of prime importance. These powers may guide outcomes given the right circumstances and so they are important in any ensuing explanations (Sayer, 1992). Critical realism asserts that there is a world that exists independently of our knowledge of it. Elements of the social world may exist regardless of our knowledge of them and this key facet of critical realism allows for the powers to exist

unexercised allowing for a plethora of possibilities (Layder, 1990). When seeking an understanding into the gaining and provision of employability skills by using critical realism we are able to understand the connections between these stratified domains that enable or constrain the development of employability skills.

In this paper we suggest three major reasons why critical realism and employability research are compatible. Firstly, critical realism allows us to understand the role of agency in employability. Indeed, Clegg notes that we should "return to the vexed question of agency" (2010:150). Students are not passive rather they are "active agents" (Archer 2007: 6) who are making specific choices as to their career paths. It is therefore vital that we have a framework to enable our understanding of active student choices, but these choices may also be structurally constrained. Rather than just limit our understanding the interpretation of meanings by people (in this case the student – as in interpretivism) the objective is to understand *what* has caused events to happen e.g. what forces have enabled the student to apply to this company? We need to contextualise the students' agency.

Secondly, critical realism is particularly suitable for complex social situations, such as research within organisations and universities, for example, establishing the influence of structures on curricula development and organisational employee skill needs. Employability exists within a complex environment where organisations, students and universities interact with one another. Structures are the rules and resources that at the same time both enable and constrain how people act, and the very actions of people serve to modify these structures (Tsoukas, 2000). The aim is to understand what structures have given rise to specific circumstances and what the causes are behind the observed events. Realism acts as a philosophical defence for employability research as it encourages the researcher to look for underlying causes, which may have important implications (Easton, 2000) enabling the researcher to use multiple research strategies to look beyond one interpretation of events to identify the myriad of possible influences on behaviour, ensuring that causality is not misattributed.

Finally, the constant search for generative mechanisms, which are in contrast to the cause and effect relationships sought by positivism, is important to realism (Mutch, 1999). The explanation of generative mechanisms involves identifying the various aspects of a particular event that may or may not have happened and can involve people, structures and events. Mechanisms are used to denote the collection of structures, powers or relations that make up events (Fleetwood, 2001). Generative mechanisms are how realists seek to explain events and yet they are independent of the events that they generate. Critical realism seeks to find generative mechanisms that lie beneath the observed situations and then explain them; even though these regularities produce observable situations the mechanism itself remains unobservable (Layder, 1990). Thus with regard to employability we can understand the mechanisms that trigger the development of such skills.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that critical realism and employability research are an ideal strategy from which to conduct research where there are multiple stakeholders. As the researcher is able to take into account the opinions of people, the structures that

surround them and the unseen mechanisms that combine to form employability skills, student and employee needs and organisational and societal employability structures.

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