Bridging the gap between collaborative and realist evaluation: A general critique and case study of European Union employment policies

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After first establishing the need for a reflexive approach to evaluation, the article focuses on the theoretical breakthrough of the ‘fourth generation’ evaluation paradigm proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1989). This is seen as having much to offer, but their stakeholder focused approach has the danger of lapsing into relativism. Therefore a ‘realist’ approach is proposed building on Pawson and Tilley (1997), going beyond deconstruction of stakeholder perspectives to make verifiable statements about programme and project effects. This is then worked through with an outline review of the issues associated with evaluating European Union Employment Strategies. The article concludes by suggesting that a realist concern for critical praxis in evaluation can also bring it closer to action research paradigms.

Keywords: Evaluation, realism, employment, European Union

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is sympathetically to analyse emerging critical traditions in evaluation and find ways of bridging collaborative and ‘realist’ traditions, working through the concrete example of European employment programmes. I argue that while evaluation should always start with the perceptions and understandings of stakeholders, the evaluator necessarily has an independent role in assessing which have greater plausibility rather than simply