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Translating back – evaluation as sociological intervention

Introduction

There is much agreement among evaluation researchers that the "dominant" paradigm of outcome evaluation usually does not work in prevention/promotion contexts and in the caring professions. Programmes and projects are seldom set up to satisfy even loosely the requirements of controlled experiments. It is difficult to fix explicit goals, to define measurable criteria for them, and to assure that the expected effects can actually be attributed to the programme or project under evaluation. The outcome evaluation paradigm does not explain why people can be very happy with a project without any proven effects, and very unhappy when the evidence of positive results is conclusive. The meanings that participants associate with the programme, and the way they construct the problems they intend to solve, are important. Programmes are examples of societal trends, and they may have many unintended effects. Therefore, we need interpretation and analysis of the programme theory to understand how the programme actually works and why, even if it is not possible to ascertain its effects or efficiency.

In this article we report on two different types of programmes we have evaluated. We have purposefully made an intervention into them by interpreting to the participants what we believe they are doing, what the underlying rationality of their programme is, and how it is related to the context in which they are working. We argue that the possibility of making a contribution from research into practice is based on what we call *the intractability of meaning*. Programme participants impute a vast array of meanings to what they do, which are supplementary to what is articulated in the programme theory and in the explicit scripts they follow in their work. Much of this supplementary meaning is contextual and beyond the reach of the participants themselves. It is quite usual for example, that their "project" appears to them unique and original, not realising that what they do is actually something that government policy has been promoting for a long time; or that it is one of the mainstream solutions in prevention/promotion or social work. Accordingly, therefore can be a wealth of experience at reach useful for developing the programme.

We use the metaphor of *translation* that is a key notion in the Actor-Network Theory (ANT) that has been developed in technology research (Latour 1993; Callon 1986). Technologies are not only based on technical knowledge - they involve a network of actors and objects, and the whole network can be seen as a translation of multifarious interests and different kinds of knowledge that are beyond control for any of the singular actors participating in it. Also alcohol and drug prevention programmes, like our cases, are translations of a meaningful reality into ideas, actions and organisations within a received institutional framework. But unlike translations from one natural language into another, translations of meaningful social realities into practices are never precise. It is the residue, the unsaid, the implied but not recognised part of reality that evaluators must work with when the "dominant paradigm" of outcome evaluation does not apply.

The Sociological Intervention

It is often complained that there is a huge chasm between practical professional knowledge and knowledge produced by research. This is often the case in objectivistic evaluation research paradigms,

which take their ideal model from the natural sciences. Their position can be described as a role of a thief. The evaluator comes, takes the material from the actors and goes to the fortifications of science to develop social theory. The actors themselves may never hear more about the study. To fill in this gap authorities have started to gather tacit knowledge to understand their own way of handling problems. Instead of depending on experts and their scientific theories for the purposes of planning ahead, authorities may employ evaluators to collect tacit knowledge afterwards but for only pragmatic, not scientific purposes. We are arguing that an intermediary position is possible but it has to face what sociology of knowledge calls "the reflexivity problem".

The reflexivity problem and the idea of sociological intervention

As soon as we recognise that human behaviour is not only rational in the narrow sense of goal attainment, we are faced with the reflexivity problem: what is it that distinguishes research knowledge from other knowledge constructing the social world, and on what basis researchers have the "right to speak", as Pierre Bourdieu has formulated the question. What scientists tell about the world is part of the world itself, participating in its construction in many different ways. Yet, there is no automatic or procedural justifications for their claims on reality.

Alain Touraine's (1981) idea of sociological intervention, the method he used in his studies on social movements, was one attempt to face this challenge. The researchers' role is to give direct feedback of the knowledge, ideologies and self-understanding that orient the groups in their actions concerning the social problem. The groups are to make their own "auto-analysis" by the help of the researcher whose position is that of the interpreter and critic.

The intractability of meaning

Translations of social ideologies and interests into institutional arrangements and practices are not precise, and therefore not easily de- and re-codable. The tacit knowledge of the actors may be very tacit, even unrecognisable to participants, and this is what makes sociological intervention both interesting and practical. The meanings that circulate between the clarity of programme theories and the not very conscious images of the participants, their actions, the context and the reactions of those they work with, are in other words *intractable*: there is always a fuzzy residue, a supplementary level of meaning, a heterogeneity. There is no unambiguous code between the language of those we study and the language in which we use to understand them. As Pierre Bourdieu has emphasised, the notion of coding (and decoding) implies a fallacy. It leads us to believe that our interpretations concerning what others do and mean is part of *their* consciousness, but in fact it is part of *ours*. In the proper sense of the term: "to place into the conscience of those one studies that which one needs to have in one's own conscience to understand what they do." (1987:98).

This means that when we attempt to identify hidden structures in the expressed knowledge of participants, we interpret them as inaccurate translations of the wider social environment *as we know it*, thus making them understandable in a new light. Translating back in interventionist evaluation research is a productive, not a reproductive (and certainly not merely a representational) act. Still, it is not very useful if it is an attempt to educate the already educated participants of the programmes we evaluate. In Alain Touraine's words, sociology is not only about increasing the awareness of those who have too little of it; it is also about decreasing the awareness of those who have it too much. Activists and partisans in social movements may develop ideological commitments that encapsulate them, rigidify their capacity to act and their sensitivity to react to situations. The same is true of partisans in new forms of social work that require voluntary commitment and devotion to a cause.

The setting: multi-professional drug prevention

Our evaluation studies concentrate on multi-professional drug prevention in the Finnish capital, Helsinki. The significance of local multi-professional networks has grown as the responsibility for planning and organising preventive social and health policy has been decentralised from the state to regions and municipalities. This decentralisation policy complies with the neoliberal administrative doctrine of New Public Management (NPM), which also stresses projects or multi-sectoral programmes rather than traditional sectoral administration, and favours markets instead of public services (Alavaikko 2000).

Below we discuss two cases. The first is our sociological intervention to one multi-professional preventive group in Helsinki. The second case is our evaluation of a city-wide programme, called

Klaari Helsinki[1] –project, which is designed to animate and co-ordinate multi-professional, cross-sectoral and community-based activities in local settings to gain better well-being to the children and youth.

One multi-professional group case - Interpretations in practice

The case we describe here focuses on one multi-professional group in Helsinki. A similar method, based on group interviews, has been applied to seven different groups comprising a larger research setting. Group interviews were carried out in three parts, and the group was given feedback soon after the first two interviews[2]. The first interview was prepared as a initial interview where the interviewer (Mirja Määttä) showed two curves from national longitudinal survey, the Finnish Adolescent Health and Lifestyle Survey (Rimpelä et al. 2002): social predisposition to drugs and the proportion of boys and girls drinking to get drunk at least once a month. She left space for the group's own interpretation of the situation. The other themes discussed were participants' experiences of multi-professional co-operation and their views on preventive actions, on what should or could be done. The first interview was analysed, and the group was given feedback after three weeks. The feedback discussion was also taped and the feedback of these two interviews was given in a report at the third interview. The participants' evaluations of the effects of the intervention were also gathered orally and in written form.

The aim of the specific multi-professional team discussed here was to help children and adults from risk families in a local municipal area of Helsinki. The pioneer-minded leader of the group was from the local neighbourhood association (voluntary organisation) and took the role of a client and resident advocate who poses strong criticism towards the municipal services in the sectors. Other group members who attended interviews were professionals representing the municipal area administration (four youth workers, two family counsellors from the social office, one supervisor of the local playground and one school psychologist). The group had a consistent and clear ideology, part of which was to be open in their discussions, so the interviews were rich in meaning.

The bureaucratic chaos
Two of the group members were family counsellors from the social office but co-operation with the social office was problematic for the group as a whole. The difficulties in co-operation can partly be explained by the lack of permanent, qualified social workers in the area and by a lack of resources in the social office. For the group, the social office was in a state of chaos and managerial shortcomings. The criticism toward their work and their decisions was also understandable because of power inequalities and disagreements in working methods. Inequality and rigid hierarchies were seen as obstacles for multi-professional co-operation.

Project worker: "... for us, who have been in this for a long time, the extremely difficult things that they [the child protection office] have to decide seems crazy. For the sake of comparison, we have been working here for seven years. Then this social worker comes who is here for five months and makes these enormously important decisions."

Being romantically concrete
The feeling of concreteness increases the functionality and motivations of the multi-professional group. If professionals feel that their co-operation benefits their clients or their area, participation in the multi-professional group is experienced as rewarding. This group was doing concrete social work among families. In spite of doubts concerning the sufficiency of their contribution amidst needs that are seen as overwhelming, they believed in what they were doing. They saw their work as a significant type of response to the quest of helping families with problems.

Project worker: "I see that our job is... to act as support persons who in a way do family work and this small-group work [for children]. We have these two practical key areas... Useless wining about what could be done for children and families who are so miserable should stop. It is a kind of frustrating

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[1] 'Klaari' refers to 'clear' and 'sober'.

[2] The method has also been developed and used in the Lahti-project (Sulkunen & Törrönen 1997).

feeling that we have relevant instruments, like this multi-professional group, but nobody's interested... Ten years of determined work here, and we could get enormous amounts of things done. But nobody's interested. Then they go on with the liturgy of what to do, who should do it."

Family counsellor from the social office: "Yeah, there are people who do things, and those who hang around thinking about what should be done."

The interpretation
The group seemed to value autonomy, creativity, sensitivity and a romantic search for concreteness in their mission. On the other hand they felt that more solid structures and recognition were necessary for successful operations. The second meeting with the group was a feedback session where the interviewer presented this contradiction to them. She gave them a list of their mutual concerns:
1) strong stress on psychology: the recognition of feelings, their elaboration and expression
2) the idealistic and romantic search for authenticity and honesty
3) the ideal of equality, and resistance to hierarchies
4) search for freedom, distaste for bureaucracy

The translation back gave them new perspectives. The first reactions were almost shocked:
Project worker: "It feels pretty wild..."
Family counsellor: "I at least recognise myself... aha, so that's what I'm like."

The group had already dealt with some of these contradictory aspects in their work counselling. The intervention thus strengthened this initial understanding and gave rise to new ways of looking at their situation and to identifying the problems of the group:

School psychologist: "...and this desire for freedom, it's a problem here. I mean, these supporting structures make our job more difficult. The conflict's right there, it's that item four: why aren't we taken seriously and why doesn't anybody understand that we are here. If we want to be so free and independent but haven't got any communications structures, no one can ask us to join their co-operation organisations because we lack the structure that organisations usually have. I'm sure this is how it is. But that's our problem.

This contradiction is, in a way, a translation of the very same broad ideological landscape that gives impetus to these kinds of groups. They are both alternatives and supplements to bureaucratic practices and the administration of social services, especially in secondary prevention. They are given space by public policy but they are also dependent on it, both economically and psychologically, because their work is commissioned to help the system.
This duality gave rise to feelings of frustration and even aggression towards the bureaucracy which, in their minds, they served better than anybody else yet were not rewarded for it. Still they were proud of being at a distance from it, on their own but really helping people, concretely.

The relationship between group actors and the researcher exemplified mutual reciprocity and independence. Participation was voluntary, and the researcher could always interview other groups. The group got the report and was able to use it as it wished. In fact, this very group used the report to persuade the funding agency that their project kept on going, was evaluated by an outside researcher and needed more resources. In that way the group could be a "thief" that uses the material the researcher has collected. Such "theft" is legitimate in this research setting, however. The group would act as a thief in a less pleasant way if it would place pressure on the researcher to act as a guerrilla for their benefit, emphasising their missions and measures over those of other groups or projects.

Understanding the conditions under which research material is produced is essential in maintaining adequate independence. In their discourse professionals articulate their intentions that may represent strong convictions, also told in order to persuade the listener. Still, while searching for these missions in group interviews and their analysis the researcher cannot remain a total outsider - merely a scientific and a rational actor – but has to stake all her/his social and emotional skills.

Klaari evaluation case - towards inevitable power relations

Our second case concerns Klaari Helsinki, a municipal programme designed to animate and co-ordinate multi-professional, cross-sectoral and community-based activities for the prevention of drug and alcohol problems among the young. The guideline is 'joint responsibility for the young'. Today Klaari consists of three managers, and since 2000 all seven districts of the city of Helsinki have a full-time coordinator. The city pays all these employees. Still, problems emerge from the definition of Klaari because its basic idea is co-operation. The coordinators regard their task as initiating, locating, coordinating, intensifying, supporting and facilitating existing structures and processes in prevention towards functional networking and co-operation of all relevant people. According to Klaari, all agencies and individuals interested in co-operation are doing 'Klaari work'.

The request for the evaluation came from the project managers who obviously want to continue 'Klaari work' after the initial project stage ends at the end of 2002. The City of Helsinki bears part of the costs of evaluation, and it needs it in order to decide if and in what form this type of prevention work should be continued. The funding for the evaluation comes mostly from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health for whom Klaari represents a pilot experiment of local level co-ordination.

From interpreters to judges
We have provided the project with several evaluation reports on its goals, ideology, and process. In these reports we placed Klaari in the larger context of drug and alcohol prevention in Finland, the Nordic countries and Western countries in gereral. We pointed out that Klaari - which for its initiators appeared as a unique and original idea with its multi-professionalism, communitarianism, co-operation and its emphasis on parenting and social skills - in fact corresponds to mainstream alcohol and drug prevention approaches in Western Europe. Furthermore, we observed that Klaari suffers from the same lack of moral resources as the late modern state in general. The political apparatus no longer has the capacity to form an opinion on most moral issues on what *is* the good life, *how* people should raise their children, *what* kind of alcohol and drug use is acceptable for whom etc. It can only insist that adult citizens should be responsible for themselves, and it can claim authority to interfere only if harm is caused to others (Sulkunen 1997). However, we also made it clear that too easy acceptance of this moral incapacity - "the ethics of not taking a stand" - also essentially weakens Klaari's possibility of success in three ways:

1) The project represents young people as distant targets, or objects, who use intoxicants because they feel ill. Young people are seen to need adult protection, which also functions as prevention from substances. In our view, a more realistic position would see young people as active agents with many possible and alternative reasons for intoxication.

2) The emphasis is so strongly indirect – supporting co-operation, networks, shared responsibility and life skills – that the project employees prefer not to speak about the very issues to be prevented: intoxicants. They claim to have no need to be experts in alcohol or drug issues because they see their task as relying on the expertise of others. In our view they need to have some stance towards intoxicants and knowledge of their differences in order to be labelled as a drug and alcohol prevention programme. In addition, coordination of relevant expertise is a logical impossibility if the coordinators have no criteria for differentiating between various candidates of expertise.

3) The organisatorial structure and power relations within the programme are confusing and thus in need of clarification.

To the extent that our interpretations were critical, they were simultaneously judgemental and normative, implying that there could be better ways to practice prevention. Also the complex power relations involved in the project and its evaluation meant difficulties for the research to completely stay within the role of a simple interpreter and critic. For example, we were explicitly asked for clear recommendations by the City of Helsinki. Since we gave them we could not totally avoid the role of the judge in order to advise the funding bodies and decision makers on how to carry on, how to direct and develop prevention in Helsinki.

The recommendations concerned the need to have a more specific view on alcohol and drug issues as well as to consider not only adults but also youth as agents rather than simply as objects. In order to accomplish this we recommended education to the staff as well changes in the organisational structure. At every turn, we stressed that those recommendations are based on our interpretations

only and that it is the task of others to evaluate our evaluation and draw the conclusions. In practice, however, the evaluation has had a lot of influence, because it has been conducted by outsiders on the basis of extensive systematic data collection and analysis, and with a comparative perspective. The board has been very attentive to the recommendations, and at the moment is trying to implement them all, whereas the managers have never totally accepted the three main criticisms.

Discussion

In this paper we have given practical examples of the intractable translations concerning the self-understanding of the two projects we evaluated. The key point in these translations is that they provide a representation, or a reformulation, of something which is already a representation of reality, however fuzzy and ambiguous.

In both cases, the intervention consisted not only of collecting material from the projects, analysing it and presenting it to the stakeholders. We also imported information to all participants, placed the projects in their historical and administrative context, and - we believe - had impact on how they see themselves and how they develop their action in the future. In both cases the projects were not only work arrangements in public service: the groups resembled the kind of new social movements that were the objects of Touraine's sociological interventions thirty years ago.

There were also differences between the two examles. In the small case study the researcher's role as an interpreter is quite easy to maintain because the intervention is voluntary and brief – meeting takes place with a group four or five times altogether. The groups are independent of the evaluation both economically and operationally. They decide how they use the report they receive. A similar autonomy of the actors is not possible to keep up in evaluating large public policy programmes. Contacts with the project's stakeholders and project workers are more long-term and complicated, partly because the aim of the evaluation is not only to propel the auto-analysis of the group but also to make recommendations for the future. Although our approach was the same - based on the notion of translation and intervention rather than predicting or measuring outcomes, our role was different. In the first case we stayed in the role of interpreter and critic, and it was the group itself who turned our report into an asset in their negotiations with others. In the second case we could not avoid taking also the role of the judge investigating the merits of the case. The conclusions were welcomed by some of the stakeholders and workers and disturbing or frightening to some.

We want to stress that even in the latter case there is nothing abnormal in the situation. Social research has always had and will have a critical role with respect to policy. The difference to the traditional situation where research was used as an instrument of planning rather than evaluation is that evaluators come to the scene usually both too early and too late. Too early, because many programmes especially in the prevention or promotion field take a long time to get their lasting shape, and the evaluation reports become outdated almost before they are delivered. And too late, because the projects have already been set up, the vested interests have been created, and the usual mistakes made.

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