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Training for Evaluative Social Work and Social Care - Offers and Demands

This paper is a “first draft” for an article presenting a national investigation of and in what way evaluation is a part of social work education in Sweden. The investigation also includes training and education in evaluation at R&D-units related to Swedish social services.

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1. Introduction

During the last years evaluation has been on the agenda as a part of the discourse in social work and social services in Sweden. This demand on evaluation and the value of the social work is connected to the tough economic situation in the municipalities and their growing responsibility for the social welfare services. At the same time there are strivings to improve the quality of social work and the ongoing professionalization of social workers. This development can be seen as a move from authority based social work towards more knowledge based social work.

In such a situation we can assume that there is a need for evaluation knowledge and evaluation capacity. What roles do the departments of social work education and the R&D-units play for social work? Is evaluation an important and frequent topic? Supported by the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare¹ we have “mapped” if and how the departments/schools of social work and the R&D-units offer courses on evaluation or support evaluative work in other ways.

The purpose of the investigation was to “map” all educational activities aimed to develop knowledge and competence for evaluation, in the programs for social work at the universities/university colleges in Sweden and in the R&D- units linked to the social services.

Our investigation was conducted during the year 2002 and reflects the situation at that time. In this article we summarize and discuss some of the results. Above all we discuss and try to explain the fact that only a minority of the students in social work (at all levels) meets evaluation in their education and those who meet evaluation – meet it in the most rudimentary way. We also discuss the fact that there are more activities (courses, training, support) for evaluation in the R&D-units, but they are not arranged in a focused way.

We start by presenting results from the investigation of university training in evaluation and continue with results from the R&D-units. Finally we give some possible explanations to our findings.²

¹ Our investigation was a part of the national program “National Support for Knowledge Development in Social Services”.

² The paper/article is based on a report in Swedish: “Att utbilda för utvärdering – en nationell kartläggning” (“Teaching for evaluation - a national investigation”) Socialstyrelsen 2003 (The National Board of Health and Welfare, 2003)

2. Teaching in evaluation at universities

Students who study the subject social work at Swedish universities can be awarded a degree corresponding to Bachelor of Science in Social Work. The students can either choose a general academic degree enabling them to practice in a wide range of service organizations, or a degree with a specialization in social care services for the physically/mentally disabled or care of the elderly.³ The undergraduate programs are (mostly) completed after 3,5 years of studies which equals 140 Swedish academic points⁴. Approximately 2 300 students are annually enrolled in the undergraduate programs although this number is rapidly growing as programs are upgraded and expanded parallel to the establishment of new programs. Furthermore, we can add an unknown number of participants in continuing educational courses (including accredited Master's courses and customized, contractual courses). Finally, PhD courses in Sweden are offered to approximately 200 currently enrolled students at six university locations.

One of the questions that we wanted to answer was: are evaluation knowledge requirements for upcoming and practicing social workers met by the university/college educational system? The data collection is a result of a study of the program content which was carried out through examination of the program/course presentation on the internet, extensive telephone interviews with the local Director of Studies and course teachers at each of the represented colleges/universities, a survey directed to these teachers and a follow-up with, again, each of the representatives of the studied programs.⁵

To facilitate the analysis and the presentation we categorized our study and its results to reflect the following:

- Undergraduate program courses, subdivided into required and elective courses
- Continuing education, including Master's degree programs and accredited courses
- PhD programs

Furthermore, we classified courses to reflect evaluation

- As the core of study, respectively
- As included in other areas of study relating to effects or quality of social work interventions, empirical design for researching social work questions, etc.

³ The number of points required for degree completion vary depending on the individual institution's program design and can, in fact, differ with as much as 40 points (1 point = 1 week full-time studies). Students can also choose to study social work within the framework of other social science degrees up to 160 academic points. The social care program has previously led to a vocational degree, 120 points. By lengthening and strengthening this program, the two bachelor programs are now in the process of a full merger within the college/university systems. This means that students within social care programs may now choose a vocational or a more academic emphasis in their degree program. Noteworthy, both programs have been the focus of in-depth evaluations. An evaluation of the vocational programs in the mid 90s concluded that 40 percent were beneath academic standards for college/university education.

⁴ One Swedish academic point = one week full time studies.

⁵ As indicators we utilized course goals, content descriptions where key words such as evaluation, quality assurance, method analysis, etc and literature lists. In our attempt to track course outcomes we've asked teachers to reflect on the value of their course for students' knowledge base, send in examples of coursework, summaries of course evaluations, etc.

Undergraduate program courses

| Social work programs not integrated with social care | Social work programs integrated with social care | Social care programs changing to socionomprogram | Other programs with social care 120 – 160 p | Other relevant programs |
|---|---|---|--|---|
| Ersta-Sköndal | Göteborg | Linköping | Kristianstad | Kalmar Bachelor in social work 140 p. |
| Lund (Helsingborg) | Stockholm | Trollhättan/ Uddevalla (Vänersborg) | Karlstad | Mälardalen. Social science programs 120 - 160p. (Eskilstuna and Västerås) |
| Mitthögskolan – Östersund | Umeå (Skellefteå and Örnsköldsvik) | | Luleå (Boden) | Växjö Pedagogy 120 p. |
| Örebro (Visby, Leksand, Orsa, Avesta, Borlänge, Motala and Lidköping) | Malmö | | Uppsala | |
| | Jönköping | | Gävle (Bollnäs, Hofors, Hudiksvall and Uppsala) | |
| | Växjö (Halmstad) | | Dalarna (Falun) | |
| | | | Örebro | |

Undergraduate programs in social work (“socionom” in Swedish) and social care in Sweden 2002/2003.

Directing our focus more specifically to our results, what light has been shed on our question; do academic institutions meet the evaluation knowledge needs of our students and professionals?

- 3 of 19 social work programs include required courses in evaluation.
- Approximately 1 in 5 students in the total population participates in a required course.
- Required courses often remain at 2-3 academic points in the undergraduate degree totaling 140 points.

- 4 of 5 students will meet evaluation only in the most rudimentary form of a single textbook or article, lecture or course evaluation.
- The most active institutions in integrating evaluation into their current programs are those who also have PhD programs.
- Courses at colleges offering other related social science programs include a relatively higher proportion of evaluation within required coursework.
- Required courses are at introductory level.
- Course literature is in Swedish and little if any English language literature incorporates into required course material.

At all institutions students will be exposed to the study of evaluation and quality issues in some extent. Certainly, it would have been astounding if we had found otherwise. Yet at the same time we say, “some extent” as it has been made evident that these two academically different, although related, subjects are both important, and are indeed included in program courses though not clearly independent of each other. Evaluation would be defined as an inherent part of the culture of teaching in and of itself. Evaluation is often somewhat enmeshed in a variety of courses. The act of completing student course evaluations is seen as a viable educational tool. Teachers and administrators defend this idea claiming that students will carry ideas of the practical value of evaluation and other quality aspects with them into the field. Despite this position on the part of the institutions, and somewhat notable, 1/3 of the evaluation courses are not evaluated. This standpoint can be significant when addressing the academic view of evaluation within social work.

Required courses at the undergraduate level

Required courses, where evaluation is seen as a core of study, are now on the agenda at 4 of Sweden’s 21 colleges/universities: the universities of Lund, Umeå, Örebro and the regional college Mälardalens högskola.⁶ Furthermore, another 8 institutions include courses where evaluation is a part of the course curriculum even though it is not the primary focus of the course. In general we have found that courses with an element of effect studies and/or evidence-based knowledge development are few. Of the 44 courses included in our study only 6 address these topics.

Courses at the established universities of Lund, Umeå and Örebro are similar in the fact that evaluation comes into focus in a discussion of methodology. In Umeå a half-term (10 points) course block targets a general review of research methods. In Lund evaluation is given space within the frame of statistical methodology. Together evaluation and quality assurance constitute 2-3 points of this 5-point course. In Örebro we see a course with its primary focus again on methodology in general but this institution requires a follow-up of evaluation through participation in a method course during the seventh, and final, term. What these three university courses have in common is the introductory nature of their content.

The required course given at Mälardalens högskola is much more of what one might conceive to be a course in evaluation. Despite the course leader’s humble description of the course as an introductory course, we would consider it more advanced than comparable courses given

⁶ Mälardalens högskola is one such college where a social science program (120 points) specifically designed for treatment workers includes studies in social work and effects of practical intervention. Of interest, and to exemplify the changing dynamics of educational programs, Gothenburg has recently started a revised undergraduate program and they too, since 2003, include obligatory studies in evaluation.

at the university institutions of social work. Our assessment is based on course requirements, theoretical and methodological discussions and required reading for the students.

Teaching instruments vary far beyond the traditional lecture method. Lectures are one way to relay knowledge of evaluation but we see that PBL-methods, other forms of group activities and independent assignments, such as production of an evaluation plan, are also utilized. Responses from teachers as to knowledge dissemination outcomes vary.

Elective courses at the undergraduate level

Students will choose from different electives based on personal interest. Electives with an evaluation focus were offered at 5 institutions 2001/02. A most interesting – and from our perspective a somewhat perplexing - example among elective courses is taken from the earlier mentioned regional college, Mälardalens högskola. The bachelor's program offered is *Welfare Work and Rehabilitation* i.e., addresses issues of treatment assessment, methodology and practice. It is worth mentioning that this course is an example of an elective course for the full range of behavioral science programs offered at the college.

The course is entitled *Evaluation As An Informational Tool* and successful completion renders the student 10 points at the B-level, i.e., the intermediary level of study. Compared to other courses, including those at a higher level, this is a very ambitious course in many regards: students will move beyond central definitions, theories, models and the current debate within the international field of research and in fact plan an evaluation.⁷

Considering elective courses we can summarize:

- In terms of the entire student population in Sweden enrolled in programs for social work, approximately 5 percent of the students are offered elective courses in evaluation.
- Most electives are located in Lund and Umeå, universities with more, clearly defined (in terms of specific academic points) mandatory courses.
- Elective courses are generally more “substantial” than obligatory courses with a well-defined number of academic points assigned without regard to institution. Despite this and their advanced placement in the degree programs, these courses can be seen as introductory in content.
- All educators, with the exception of one, have PhD degrees.
- Electives focusing on evaluation are not regarded as “popular” courses among students.

Continuing education including PhD-programs

For the purpose of our study we have divided continuing education into higher degree programs (Master’s studies and PhD programs) and more traditional continuing education with working professionals as its target group. Included in this latter category are made-to-order courses, i.e., contract teaching, by which we mean independent study opportunities not

⁷ Student evaluations reflect a great respect for this course. Critical points of view most often target an emphasis on English course material Swedish and international literature totaling to 1800 pages. What we have found of extreme interest is that such an elective was not offered during the academic year 2001/02. Instead, this course seemingly fell the victim of students’ expression of interest, or rather lack thereof.

uncommonly created by universities/colleges in collaboration with social work organizations upon request and oftentimes accredited. Firstly, let us examine the academic degree programs. Is it here we make a breakthrough in Swedish evaluation teaching/training?

Master's degree programs

Social work students and professionals can attain a Master's degree at 14 of the 21 program institutions. The common denominator is an independent empirical study resulting in a 10-point paper. Otherwise degree requirements vary from 20 to 40 points and can include 5-10 points of required or elective coursework. We estimate that 140 students of those participating in the 14 different Master's programs in 2001/02, have been confronted with evaluation in the form of a single lecture; at most students have been exposed to evaluation through a specific, evaluation focused course of 5 points.

PhD programs

According to our findings none of the doctoral programs included courses addressing evaluation in their curriculum during the academic year 2001/02. Since the 1980s approximately 100 doctoral students have successfully completed an evaluation-related course at this level. In total Sweden has had roughly 250 students enrolled in these programs. During the past three years, 14 of these 100 doctoral candidates have participated and completed two courses. Eleven courses have in all been offered.

Of greater interest is perhaps how evaluation is addressed at this level. We have categorized: courses *about* evaluation and courses *of* evaluation. By this we mean those that examine evaluation as a research phenomenon respectively those that, in fact, put their energies into addressing evaluation of interventions and their effects for client populations. Courses *about* evaluation dominate; courses focusing on *active* evaluation appear to draw fewer participants. With optimism we can relate to you that this apparent academic weakness is being remedied: what appears to be an advanced, national course is currently running and involves approximately 20 doctoral students.

Continuing education for practicing professionals

The various institutions offer a large assortment of continuing education courses addressing evaluation and quality issues in social work. Here lies the heart of activity in regards to evaluation-related knowledge development. Approximately 600 practitioners have participated in such courses during the 1990s, most courses being accredited. During the academic year 2001/02 we note that 200 participants have completed accredited courses where evaluation is the core of study.

Compared to the undergraduate courses the content of the continuing education curriculum is deemed more advanced although they still focus on the introductory level. Again, we note a rich variation of teaching methods. Among the more original approaches we have been exposed to is a course given through the regional college Malmö högskola. Within the framework of this course, professional social workers are given a 5-week paid academic leave studying on a full-time basis the theoretical and methodological aspects of evaluation. Thereafter workers will return to their home organizations on a part-time basis while evaluation "training" (more practice-based studies) continues parallel to client work. Deeper course content and a more demanding practical activity level are reflected in the structure and content of this course.

Colleges/universities have the capacity to produce this type of educational activity primarily targeting professionals active in social work organizations. However, our study shows that there is cause for concern since many of those who give these courses report that this is a market forum where supply is directly influenced by organizational resources and time-availability/management questions for professional social workers.

Summary

Returning to this presentation's central question: are evaluation knowledge requirements for upcoming and practicing social workers met by the university/college educational system?

A minority of students within the 21 social work programs in Sweden are exposed to evaluation on a more than rudimentary level. One out of five students participates in a required course with a more or less directed study of evaluation. Teachers within the bachelor's programs would assert that evaluation is difficult to extract and address independently. Instead evaluation is an integrated part of learning and coursework and thus, the value of evaluation becomes evident. In contrast, our study shows that this is true in only a smaller extent. Most commonly students will come in contact with the concept of evaluation through a single lecture or perhaps an introductory level textbook. In a most primitive fashion, exposure to evaluation is the result of course evaluation.

Few students will choose electives that target evaluation. Five percent of the entire social work student population during the academic year 2001/02 chose such a course to enrich their program. Electives often encompass "more" but are often at risk for cancellation as student preferences control offered courses.

Course literature in English is absent. This means that despite its dominance in social work and evaluation, inclusion of course literature in English in the syllabus is rather an exception. When included it is seldom the required material and if so, it is often just a single article.

Teaching methods are rich in variety at all levels within all types of college/university courses. They include almost everything from traditional lectures to applied learning activities.

The number of Master's degree programs is on the rise and several new courses have now started during this year's fall term. A relatively low number of doctoral candidates and graduates have been exposed to evaluation. Yet, the numbers are also expected to rise. This is partly due to the ongoing and nationally sponsored doctoral course.

Numerically and even with regard to content depth, the main activity in regards to evaluation-related knowledge development lies within the continuing education curriculum. Such courses have rewarded approximately 600 practitioners with academic points during the 1990s. Whether this trend will continue is uncertain, given employers' budget restrictions for financing this form of customized educational package and practitioners' difficulties in managing coursework and client work simultaneously.

3. Teaching and supporting evaluation at R&D-units

There are almost 280 municipalities in Sweden, which are responsible for the public social services. Some of the municipalities have a rather small number of inhabitants (just 5000 – 6000 inhabitants) while others are “big cities” (for example Stockholm 750 000 and Gothenburg 450 000 inhabitants). The Social Services Act⁸, which regulates the social services in the municipalities, sets “high goals” for the social welfare work and for the social workers who are supposed to deliver services of “good quality” to meet different needs. During the last decade the financial situation has been very tough for the municipalities. Moreover, at the same time, the quality in different social services has been put in question. Some questions are: Do we get enough value for money from the social services? How can the quality be developed?

In this situation many Research and Development Units (R&D-units) have been established in recent years. In almost all municipalities with more than 50 000 inhabitants at least one such unit exists today. Smaller municipalities are often partners in R&D-units. The units are generally supported by the state, financially and in other ways. The expressed purpose is to promote good quality in the welfare services and to develop knowledge. An important task is also to bridge the gap between education – research – and social work practice.

Obviously, the R&D-units differ in size (Most of them are rather small, often employing less than 10 people) and organization. Nevertheless, there are some common features. Researchers and social workers are involved and very often work together in projects. The research is meant to be developed from practice and be used in practice. Some R&D-units are linked to universities/colleges, while others have closer ties to municipalities.

Given these aims and purposes, we can assume that evaluative work plays an important role in forming units. Our ambition was to map all activities at the R&D-units that were aimed to develop evaluation competence, that is, how to carry out evaluative work in social services. Simply put, we have striven to identify all courses in evaluation and related activities such as workshops, seminars and conferences on evaluation (under the direction of local R&D-units). Educational, training and supporting activities have been of interest to us. To summarize, we talk about *activities* to educate, support, train or promote evaluation.⁹

These were our main questions:

- What is the scope and importance of activities?
- How are they carried out?
- Which are the target-groups?
- To what extent are the skills developed utilized in social service practice?

The methods used were mainly three: interviews with representatives from the R&D-units, surveys to all units, studies of documents and reports from all units.

⁸ The law sets frames for social work and social care for elderly people, physically/mentally disabled, substance abusers, children, families and young people. The law also regulates social assistance.

⁹ Using a market-based illustration, we have focused on the supply of activities, which means that we lack empirical data to prove whether activities are “what is needed”. But of course we have thoughts about that.

Results

In total we could identify 39 R&D-units connected to social service organizations¹⁰. We have successfully gathered data from 37 of them.

It is not surprising that evaluation, in general terms, plays an important role in the every day work in an R&D-unit. In 33 of those responding to our survey, evaluation, including supporting evaluative work, is deemed important. Moreover, the demand for evaluation is expected to grow in the future. Naturally, the units conduct evaluations most often requested by the units' owners, i.e. the municipalities in the region. This type of activity is not so interesting to us, but it shows that evaluation plays an important role in routine tasks.

The following four types of activities that we have identified, are of greater interest for our results:

* *Educational courses* – more or less comprehensive. Many of the units have arranged courses at the university level, often together with a local university. The courses are given part-time in order to make it possible to combine studies with “ordinary work”. Very often the courses are divided into two parts: firstly, evaluation theories and methodology and secondly, “paper-work” or utilization of evaluation concepts/methodology directly connected to the working place. The course can focus on planning and, sometimes, conducting an evaluation “at home”. Sometimes the courses are rather short – ranging in duration from one day up to a week – and are limited to introducing the basics of evaluation.

* *Supervision*. A researcher from the R&D-unit meets one or more social workers engaged in a local evaluation. This goes on during the evaluation process. The supervisor gives advice how to handle problems (theoretical or practical) that may surface during the process.

* Different forms of “*workshops*”. Some of them are named “R&D-circles”. In such a circle a number of social workers regularly meet a researcher to discuss evaluation problems. Sometimes, they resemble “discussion-clubs”. But sometimes, the workshops deal with solving practical evaluation problems and supporting evaluation work.

* *Seminars and conferences* are frequent. The aim is mainly to give inspiration for evaluative work at home. Sometimes new techniques are introduced. It happens that more critical discussions focus on the “evaluation discourse”.

* There are still more types of activities that can be mentioned, such as: R&D-café, rent-a-scientist, open-house consulting, etc.

In summary, these types of activities illustrate a broad spectrum of activities to support and promote evaluative work. We can say that R&D-units give external support for internal evaluations. We have labeled this “capacity building” for local evaluations.

¹⁰ As mentioned above this is a rather new and a “dynamic phenomenon”; there are new R&D-units today, others may have been closed and still others have merged.

What is the scope of these activities?

How many social workers take part? If we were pessimists we would claim that only 2000 – 3000 out of approximately 250 000 persons working in Swedish social services have been involved in the activities described above. Most people working in Swedish social services do not have an academic degree. They work as assisting nurses, or similar, in the support of elderly or disabled people. Participants in the activities presented are primarily social workers with an academic degree. Different investigations have shown that managers and persons responsible for developmental work take part in R&D-activities more frequently than other employee groups. To express it in more positive terms we could say that participants are an “avant-garde,” important for promoting better social work at a local level.

What is known about the importance and the value of the activities described above?

It is hard to answer this question. Many of our informants stress that the different activities have been of great importance to individual participants. At the same time, it is more difficult to comment what the activities mean for organizations. Do activities - or do they not - contribute to better evaluative capacity, which in turn can be used to promote better quality in social work and/or influence personnel to make better methodological choices for social work?

What is in focus?

If evaluation is linked to the task of creating new knowledge in social services – what is the most important thing to focus on? This question is both problematic¹¹ and important. We put the question in this way: “Knowledge development is a current theme in the field of social services is assigned different meanings. What is, according to your understanding, the most important thing to stress?” Respondents could choose more than one of the following alternatives:

| <i>Alternative:</i> | <i>Frequency</i> |
|---|------------------|
| User evaluation | 28 |
| Support reflection | 24 |
| Self evaluation | 23 |
| More co-operation with universities | 20 |
| Process evaluation | 19 |
| Quality assurance – development | 16 |
| Result evaluation | 15 |
| Program evaluation and project evaluation | 15 |
| Goal evaluation | 10 |
| Evidence-based evaluation | 9 |
| To use standardized instruments | 8 |
| Cost-benefit analyses | 6 |
| Other | 3 |

NB: These results must be viewed with reservation! However, one can not claim that discussion and debate upon “evidence-based social work” are highly rated when R&D-units rank what is important to focus on. We think this has to do with the accentuation to improve

¹¹ One of our informants commented: “The choice of method ought to depend on the question for the evaluation. You cannot say that one specific method is the right one every time.” (our translation)

“good quality”, which seems to be more prominent than conducting and supporting evaluation work similar to “scientific work”.

Summary

There has been a rapid growth of R&D-units in Sweden in recent years. They aim to support and develop social services of “good quality” and to support creation of new and useful knowledge at a local level. Evaluation and support of evaluation efforts through different activities are important for R&D-units. Recently performed evaluations of the R&D-units themselves indicate that the units are important for social workers in different ways: The units are rather well known and have a good reputation. The social workers often get new ideas and inspiration from the units. However, one problem may occur, at least in the long run: How can the units contribute to knowledge development with a scientific base? They sometimes seem to be occupied with helping social workers/social services “in their daily work” even though they have research capacity for more (ref R&D evaluation).

There is no doubt that R&D-units are important in the support of “quality work” in different ways: supporting capacity building for the local social services through different activities related to evaluation: educational courses, seminars, supervision, workshops, conferences and more. But, what could be the R&D-units’ role in the process of transforming social work from “authority-based” to a more “knowledge-based”? We think in this sense the R&D-units still have a long way to go.

4. Offers and demands

Coming to the end of this article we will look upon the fields of training in evaluation as a question of offers and demands. This will allow us both to put up some tentative remarks and to present a more analytical framework.

Offers

In regards to the situation we have several possible explanations rooted, in part, to circumstances outside the university system – *external* - and also those that can be viewed as specific to/for higher education – *internal*.

External

Practically speaking we have seen that during the late 1990s external pressure placed on social services to report to national authorities, specifically regarding results of client work efforts, increased. Research and development units and their work are coupled to this development. What is relevant here is that the resulting, intensified focus on evaluation simultaneously placed the role of higher education in the spotlight; what can programs do to increase evaluation capacity? The state has, so to speak, turned up the heat: both social service organizations and higher education are meant to find different ways to reinforce a knowledge-based practice.

Another explanatory factor that we see as “external” is the relatively non-existent professional discourse for evaluation with regards to social issues in Sweden. Very little attention is given

in the form of scientific articles, establishing branch organizations, etc. The frames of discourse are now being discussed – and disputed based on ideological differences.

Internal

We see a clear bond between low levels of interest for evaluation and the lack of an internal motor within the university system. Psychodynamic and humanistic theories dominate the bachelor's programs problematically linking evaluation to another scientific tradition. Effect-related issues are shadowed by the relational emphasis between client-social worker. Little attention in the primary learning environment is given to the results of this relationship.

Another internal factor is the freedom of educational work and course development inherent in any classroom situation. Very little transparency exists between various courses, often resulting in a lack of coherency for programs. Courses are very much dependent on individual teachers, their knowledge levels, research background (if any) and capacity to take initiative. We see that “splitting” between theory and practice is not an uncommon occurrence in programs.

Finally, we focus on tangible general difficulties for educational programs with parallel ambitions to meet both academic and vocational goals. We are hard pressed to know what, if any, influence courses have for hands-on, practical social work. For example we recognize the diffuse connection between courses in scientific research methods and how this knowledge can be utilized in social work practice. Possibly we find here an explanation as to why courses in evaluation are maintained on a rudimentary level. Furthermore, this could also be why teachers/institutions very often refer to bits and pieces of evaluation knowledge in their courses when asked whether evaluation is a topic in their course. A teacher does not need evidence showing their course's relevance for practical social work. Neither will an institution know what effects the lack of a certain form of knowledge has for practical field work.

The question of “What works?” is vital to raise; certainly to the field of social work practice, but also to educational programs, annually releasing 2000 workers into the job market.

Demands

At first sight it might be surprising that the evaluation wave and the quest for New Public Management in the social services have not caused a heavy demand for the universities to train for evaluation. However, this could be explained when taking into account the specific conditions (problems) that characterize those organizations.

1 Problems of competence

Evaluations seldom address and are given limited importance for actual fieldwork. There is a lack of evidence concerning methods that work well and those that are not. This has led to declared skepticism concerning results, insufficient documentation, levels of training and quality. Since goals are often vague and connected to ideology it is unclear what kind of competence, and thereby knowledge, are in demand.

2 Problems of legitimacy

The social research has exposed that social service organizations are highly dependent of legitimacy and therefore attempt to operate according to the majority of expectations. Organizations are able to produce one kind of service but outwardly they claim providing

another. They are often connected to each other in fields in which they attempt to imitate each other and perform as expected. They are continually under the external scrutiny of reformers striving to alter them to their opinion of the mission and how it should be fulfilled.

3 Problems of organization

Internal and external pressure creates constant interior demands and stability is becoming rare. Reorganizations are frequent and loose couplings meet the need of specialization. Organizations are continually exposed to interior questions which they attempt to solve by finding new ways of action. Questions arise, designed as dilemmas and multi-faceted, wicked problems. A climate of perpetual dissatisfaction over working conditions as well as financial cutbacks add to the stress and the demands of reorganizing.

4 Problems of technology

A multitude of work methods flourish within social welfare. These are often developed as different forms of programs that clients participate in or as a result of non-compliance meet with sanctions. Usually knowledge is insufficient regarding how the technology functions. Instead, we observe universal acceptance that social work officials are able to act under their own discretion and that the client – worker relationship is central in the process of transformation. The technology is affected by the fact that social work is influenced by two strong forces. One is coercion and power to control the unworthy poor. The other is the commitment to the support and aid according to the demands of the client. This dilemma cuts through technology.

Coping with ambiguity

Theories of social systems argue that organizations are formed to meet certain goals set by formal authorities within the organization. Regulations and structures are therefore created in order to maintain organizations as effectively as possible. A number of guidelines help the administration to achieve agreement among co-workers, to coordinate and to maintain activities and afterward to control them so that error can be corrected and successful behaviors preserved.

Especially, the theories stress the way social service organizations manage ambiguity. In fairly closed systems this can be reasonably controlled through various ways of planning and evaluation whereby organizations make sure that the technical core is effected. This is the central theme for those framing the concept of "scientific management". During the last 50 years a large number of logical and functional features have been deployed to maximize performance and to rationalize activities. The growing features of evaluation and the concept of knowledge-based, learning organizations seems to be the modern application of this tradition. Efforts are based namely on the essence of enlarging the degree of rationalization related to performance connected to the technical core of the organization.

Ambiguity is especially typical within social welfare organizations and the thesis about closed systems has been challenged and, for the most, put aside. Instead, organizations are described as open and complex composed by great numbers of more or less integrated, independent parts each one contributing to the whole in an often unexpected, unforeseeable elusive and elaborate manner. Ambiguity is also perpetually present since human actions are difficult to predict and social welfare organizations interact within areas that are highly pervaded, often of varying moral and normative and ideological appraisals. This in turn limits the opportunity

to gather the data needed for well-founded decisions. Various coping strategies are therefore formulated. Those have been expressed as bounded rationality, standardization of decisions and service, the creation of rationalized myths and processes of buffering.¹² Acceptance of evaluation could be devastating to an organization, thereby risking the admittance of a Trojan horse. Instead of evaluation organizations are occupied with various forms of rationalization.

In other words it is not surprising that there has not been any demand for evaluation capacity within those organizations. This is however due to change. The demand for evaluation has increased and become an ever more core activity to control and to steer public agencies. The interest for evaluation, especially public performance, has been increasing parallel to the economic decline of the 1990s and in response to demands of efficiency and quality. Thus authorities within the Swedish national state and local communes create units for evaluation, control and accountancy. Sweden is now considered a leading nation regarding to evaluation.¹³ The demands on evaluation within the social welfare have been accentuated and discussions are above all focused on the appropriateness of evidence-based practice. Comparisons have been made with medical clinical practitioners and their practice, which is firmly rooted in a base of scientifically, tested methods. In different ways the Swedish State attempts to spawn and govern the development of and generate approaches for a social work practice based on the grounds of accurate knowledge. As examples can be mentioned: the creation of the central institute of evaluation (CUS), contacts with Campbell Collaboration, economic support to establish local research and development units.

Knowledge of intended and non-intentional effects of social interventions is expected to an ever increasing quality and to a (as voiced by many and eagerly longed for) modernization of the social welfare organizations. This leads to demands both on access at to evidence-based knowledge and to the development of local evaluation capacity. This is nothing new in an international perspective.¹⁴ It is now more legitimate than ever to raise the issue that this is necessary for a practice, which has of tradition been able to rely on authority instead of demonstrated efficiency.

¹² See the works of Herbert Simon, Philip Selznick and James Thompson, some of those more than 50 years old but with a striking actuality. Theories of institutionalism will help us to understand those everyday problems in a deeper sense; Meyer & Scott 1983, Powell & DiMaggio 1991.

¹³ In accordance with the rating presented in "International Atlas of Evaluation" 2002.

¹⁴ Gambrill 1999, Mullen 2002.

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