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Beyond Methodology

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The problematic concept of implementing methodology - the case of social welfare evaluation in Sweden

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Abstract

When discussing choice of methodology in evaluation studies, it is wise to reflect upon organizational considerations concerning contracting, conducting and utilization.

Based upon research conducted among social workers in Sweden this paper focuses upon possibilities and problems in knowledge dissemination and usage. Powerful institutions in Sweden are now encouraging knowledge development of social services. The goal presented being to modernize social service organizations through the use of evaluations as a working concept. The premise being then that intervention should be based upon how services are valued by clients. Although the case is from Sweden it is argued that the topic crosses international boundaries.

The paper stresses a multi-theoretical framework in order to understand this process. Such a framework is applied.

In the year 2000 Newsweek described Sweden as a leading country in the field of knowledge production and in the midst of an exiting development. At the same time the newly appointed director of The National Board of Health and Social Services published a, since then, widely cited article in the most read Swedish newspaper where she accused the social welfare organizations of being uninterested in the needs of their clients and that interventions where put forward without sufficient knowledge of their result. Clients are exposed for experiments, the work being prosecuted based on feelings and absent from the scrutiny evaluations.

Apparently the social sector is not included in Newsweek´s positive depiction of Sweden as a high ranked knowledge nation. This defies of years of social research and the fact that organizations` administrators are highly qualified officials. The purpose of this paper is to move beyond the ambitious focus on methodology of this conference and to shed light on some problems concerning this concept. When focusing social service organizations it is obvious that there are some major and more pressing questions. In this paper I argue that a multi-theoretical framework is asserted to catch the complexity and the opportunity to labor methodically with evaluation within social service organizations. Primarily I address organizations within the municipal social welfare system whose mission is to investigate, support and offer treatment to people with any form of social problem: lack of money, abuse, problems within the family, physically/mentally disabled, age-related, etc.

In Sweden the public sector has augmented sharply during 1990 - 2000 despite that it designates as a period of crisis with vast public cutbacks. The social welfare administrations have doubled their costs and now absorb 126 billion sw.kr (2001), a third of outright budget costs. The cut-downs during the economic decline of the 90´s effected above all already weak clusters: poorly-educated, woman with children, youth trying to get established in the labor market as well as new immigrants /refugees. At most as many as 8 % of the population were dependent on social welfare assistance. This is an exceptionally high level in Sweden. However, there has been an increasing demand on trained officials` despite privatization, cutbacks and growing demands on efficiency. The number of municipally employed social workers has consequentially increased by 40 % during the period 1990 - 2001 (Salonen 2003).

Parallel with this development we have seen an expansion of university programs focused on treating, caring and supporting functions within social welfare. These alterations have occurred on several levels:
- Nationalization of higher social welfare education programs that earlier were organized by the municipalities. Following vast criticism for inferior quality they have either been depositing down or been creating bonds to universities and colleges.
- Expansion of university programs from 2 years to both 3 and 4 years.
- Program content enhanced to include a three year undergraduate degree including separate scientific essay.
- An expanding number of Master`s programs, attractive to many students as well as working professionals together with an expanding number of PhD-programs in social work. Now at 6 universities, 4 three years ago.

In summary we now see a vast scientification of social work in Sweden. The process contains the tensions inherent within the fields of knowledge and of action as well as among conflicting interests. Varied directions are suggested as different, important actors (researchers, professionals, authorities and welfare organizations) are striving to put forward their specific interests and declared views upon anxious know-how. Central in this process are demands that the social welfare systems should evolve to an organization driven by a

systematic focus on knowledge. Principles that in fact were brought to attention for the first time more than 30 years ago. It is especially asserted from several directions that the efforts of social welfare organizations have to be properly evaluated and that future decisions should be based upon knowledge of the results/effects of efforts for affected clients.

Problem and solution

The solution "a knowledge based social welfare" aims to respond to a number of serious problems. I sort them into four categories: competence, legitimacy, organization and technology.

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

Problems of legitimacy
The social research has exposed that social service organizations are highly dependent of legitimacy and therefore are attempting to operate according to the majority of expectations. Organizations are able to produce one kind of service but outwardly allege to providing another. They are often connected to each other in fields where there 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.

Problems of organization
Internal and external pressure creates constant interior demands and stability is becoming rare. Reorganizations are frequent and loose couplings meets the need of specialization. Organizations are continually exposed to interior questions 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 cut-backs adds to the stress and the demands of reorganizing.

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 is functioning. 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 effected 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.

In Sweden 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 90`s and in response to demands on efficiency and quality. Thus authorities within the Swedish national state and local

communes create unites for evaluation, control and accountancy. Sweden is now considered a leading nation regarding to evaluation.[1] The demands on evaluation within the social welfare have been accentuated and discussions in Sweden are above all focused on the appropriateness of evidence-based practice. Comparisons have been made with medical clinical practitioners' and their practice rooted firmly in a base of scientifically tested methods. Through the creation of the central institute of evaluation (CUS), contacts with Campbell Collaboration, economic support to establish local research and development units and also with a vast central initiative the state attempts to spawn and govern the development of and generate approaches for a social work practice based on the grounds of accurate knowledge.

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 form) modernization of the social welfare organizations. This leads to demands both on access to evidence-based knowledge and to the development of local evaluation capacity. This is nothing new in an international perspective. Yet many continue to rise the issue that this is necessary for a practice that has, of tradition, been able to rely on authority instead of demonstrated efficiency (Gambrill 1999, Mullen 2002).

Organizational coping

With the power to intervene follows the duty to evaluate. Could the above concept with predecessors from science and central authorities, be described as such? Probably there are few objections anti it is anxious that social intervention are based on profound knowledge of their sequel. This widely spread opinion has two assumptions. Partly that social welfare organizations are able to function in such a way that knowledge of their sequel is considered. And partly that it is possible to implement the idea of a knowledge based social work within these organizations. What does this concept imply for the social welfare organizations affected? Inquiring requires a variety of academic tools, meaning a number of well-founded hypothesis that can help to deliver possible answers.

Organizations must combine various strategies to execute their obligations. For example they need to be goal-oriented and efficient and is often an excellent situation if job-satisfaction and performance levels among employees are high. Furthermore organizations need resources and they must in various manner interact with their environment; clients, partners, financers, authorities etc. There also exists a large number of theories giving cautious support to the obligations that organizations face, theories that in several cases also propose to proper management (Payne 1997).

Compared to other forms of organizations those requiring people as their raw material have got some complicating characteristics. Y. Hasenfeld (1992) suggests that they should be sorted according to the extent they are able to govern their actions and in procrastination with respect to whether they are open or closed systems in relationship to their environment. This accordingly aligns with a number of classic theories about organizational behavior. Some of these theories (most of them half a century old) will be applied in the following discussion. The first group of theories addresses the extent to which organizations succeed in producing rationales, perceiving decisions and implementing the same or if, in contrast, they are effected

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[1] In accordance with the rating presented in "International Atlas of Evaluation" 2002).

by factors they are unable to govern. The second group concentrates on organizations` interaction with their environment and especially the demands of efforts to influence actions. Let us proceed to test these theories by analyzing the previously made claims to foster evaluation capacity within social services!

Group 1	Theories of rationality, power and processes
Group 2	Theories about systems, cultures and environment

In reality these distinctions are not quite so clearly defined. Instead they merge. The point is to gain advantage of some of their accumulated experiences to understand the concept of developing evaluation capacity within the social welfare administration.

Structural theories and 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.

Many 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 compromised of great numbers of more or less integrated, independent parts each one contributing to the whole in an often unexpected, unforeseeable elusive and elaborately manner (Thompson 1967). Ambiguity is also perpetually present since human actions are difficult to predict and social welfare organizations interact within areas that are highly pervaded of often varying moral, 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.

One such central strategy is *bounded rationality* which was brought to our attention more than fifty years ago by Herbert Simon (1945) during his studies of administrative work. Because of the lack of outright data, one has to compromise with ideals and instead accept incomplete and partial knowledge in planning and decision-making. Satisfying is also a central theme in theories of planning; incrementalism. Another is the *standardization* of decisions and service. Sticking to previously approved techniques reduces complexity and facilitate selection. Thus creating uniformity and measurability. Those standardized features are usually obstructed by *rationalized myths* and organizations are thereby able to elude comments. Contempt for the lack of deficits of evaluation has deservedly bowled us over this problem since social work methods are used despite of documented success. However, knowledge deficits have an important stabilizing function – what you do not know you need not bother with.

The concept of *buffering* applies to theories included in the second group. It explains the consequences resulting from when an organization seeks to preserve its` core activity despite intensive external attention and influence. A multitude of methods exists within the social welfare sector that frequently are undertaken in contrast to proof of merit and worth. The co-workers of an organization regulate input of data in accordance with their professional know-how. This occurs more or less rationalized and conveyed appreciation concerning their technology. A moderate multitude of organizational data is released enough to stabilize demand from the environment and to avoid threats to its` core activities. Acceptance of evaluation could be devastating to an organization, thereby risking the admittance of a Trojan's horse. Instead of evaluation organizations are occupied with various forms of rationalization.

Several theories emphasize the force of cultural pressure and how organizations attempt to protect themselves from external influence. Demands from the environment try to infiltrate. This is why organizations experience a need to protect themselves while at the same time they are obliged to assimilate in order to attain and uphold legitimacy. A strong uniting force is the creation of a common ground. Therefore symbols are upheld, cultural activities are taken for granted and new ideas are put aside. Organizations are often interdependent; common regulations and standardization are becoming succession. They interact within similar fields of action, legislation, markets and training for personnel (Meyer & Scott 1983, Powell & DiMaggio 1991).

How then should social welfare organizations deal with this broad concept of evaluation?

Cooptation as a possibility

All social activities are highly dependent on legitimacy within their own vicinity. Constant accommodation is necessary. Social welfare organizations incorporate predominant cultural symbols and institutionalized regulations. Thus environment penetrates organizations, reducing variation and effecting equation; isomorphic structures arise. This is a two-sided process. Conservative and cultural parts are resistant to influence but organizations, at the same time, have to adapt onto institutionalized demands.

Cooptation, is according to Philip Selznick`s investigations in the forties, the process whereby organizations adopt demands of the environments in order to neutralize vast threats against their stability and existence (1949). This might be the exit offered. As I previously have shown the presentation of the stabilizing mechanisms organizations have developed to uphold status quo strong institutional pressure to achieve alteration will be necessary. This is assumed to develop in three ways.

Firstly from the inside of organizations when formal, informal leaders and key persons consciously pursue the idea of an evaluative attitude. New generations of social workers provided with proper knowledge and a positive attitude towards evaluation may emerge. This demands access to education which addresses the highlights of our next presentation; is this provided?

Secondly, demands might come from the academic community and universities who have the authority to question social welfare organizations, the existing way of functioning and,

accordingly, that which threatens their legitimacy. One way to handle such criticism is by buffering. Social welfare organizations are at the moment establishing research and development units of their own whose work, at the same time, is seen to be more available and less imminent. In our last presentation we give an account of an examination of these organizations.

Thirdly, alterations may occur if dominant actors such as politicians, grant authorities and legislation demand a change. Such a process will need – as we say in Sweden "carrots and sticks" ie incentives and punishments. Currently "carrots" almost exclusively dominate this process: long- and short term projects are financed by the Swedish state. In the mid-eighties several proposed bills that would have sharpened the institutional pressure on social welfare organizations were rejected due to financial limitations.

With regard to current circumstances this is a long-term process. Endeavors to facilitate an evaluative society within social service administration is under minded by its` stout culture and inherited rationales of decision-making. However, this process will probably be facilitated by an augmented institutional pressure, compelling social welfare organizations to adopt more modern, rational and scientific principles. On the other hand, those principles have superb parities with the principles of scientific management that have been brought forth during decades of research within organizations and have been criticized for being too closed, unrealistic and problematic. The outcome for the idea to establish an evaluating social service organization is uncertain. Not for the lack of demand for a rational, well-founded base of knowledge but because this notion in itself contains conflicting forms of knowledge, interests and positions. Social welfare organizations are exposed to an extreme and conflicting cross-wind in this matter. Yet it is a situation they are familiar with and have thus far shown an adequate capacity for resistance.

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