Reflection on:
"The Power and Paradoxes of Evaluation Systems – Increasing Use but Impeding Change"
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For me, evaluation is a fascinating field full of paradoxes and I welcome the fact that the article draws attention to the power and paradoxes of evaluation systems. The reflections that follow, rooted in the Swedish context, come from a PhD in sociology who has learned to love evaluation. I am privileged in that I can move across the Swedish evaluation landscape and its various fields of play such as academia, the Swedish Evaluation Society (SVUF) and the arenas that evaluation researchers tend to call "practice". Here are my thoughts, sparked by the article, on contestability differential, evaluation systems, the paradox of epistemological coherence and the ways forward.

As I have pointed out elsewhere (Magdalenić, 2019), given that evaluation has become institutionalised, the time has come to turn our attention to the conditions for and practices of evaluation in various occupational contexts. The article is a step in that direction, inasmuch as it provides evidence about the ways in which a specific type of evaluation system works in the context within which it was constructed.

To begin with, I would like to add to the issue of power in evaluation viewed through the concept of contestability differential, by drawing on my experience of another evaluation system. I still recall the atmosphere in the room when a group of experts taking part in an evaluation of quality of education in an academic discipline realised how their discussions were translated into an evaluation system and the consequences that the indicators, which the group helped to design, would have in practice, and that it was too late to make any changes. The discipline being evaluated subsequently responded by revitalising internal discussions on the core of its expertise and quality as professional conduct. Based on this experience of power in evaluation and the contestability differential I would say that even though an evaluation system may typically be constructed as an asymmetrical power relation between a governing subject (evaluation) and a governed subject (evaluand), the governed subject is not automatically powerless. Professions and organisations may eventually come up with ways to deal with evaluation systems that, on the one hand, put them in a (permanently) contested state, and, on the other hand, carry on with professional work.

The article also brought to mind thoughts from some years ago on the theme regarding, to paraphrase the author, whether it is possible to measure the complexity of what seems to work. As part of a single evaluation of a complex social programme, I interviewed professionals working with children and young adults who had committed a crime. The interview material enabled me to reconstruct how the professionals made the programme generate its intended effects by building trusting relationships, being available even outside office hours or when on vacation, and viewing young people in the programme as active subjects instead of passive objects of work. If this is what contributes to empowering young people and setting life changing processes in motion, I pondered, would it be possible to make these kind of powerful caring relations –

some would say love – visible and quantify them, and how would such a system need to be constructed? I proposed in the evaluation report that one possible way to improve the programme would be to get evaluators to collaborate with the professionals in order to reconstruct the theoretical underpinnings for how the professionals in some local contexts make the programme work.

Now over to the paradoxes of power that the author identifies and discusses: permanence, organisational embeddedness and epistemological coherence. To me, all three resonate well with evaluation theory and the growing body of research on monitoring and evaluation systems. I will expand on the paradox of epistemological coherence, which is a tricky one inasmuch as the evaluation literature views underlying epistemology as a core element of an evaluation system. The paradox of epistemological coherence, as the author describes it, is about the evaluation system simultaneously increasing the use of evaluations and decreasing the usability of evaluations. The article provides evidence of how the actors who are involved in keeping the evaluation system operating try out different strategies to tackle the paradox of epistemological coherence but that their positions are fixed – and the inbuilt paradox remains. Although not discussed in such a way, the evidence that the author puts forward also offers insights into how the evaluation and the evaluation system analysed are socially constructed through, for instance, the contextual arrangements in which they are embedded, epistemological foundation, law and economic incentives, knowledge perspective, resources and actors whose power relations and actions are conditioned. Textbooks on evaluation describe the pros and cons of various evaluation models, including monitoring and evaluation systems. The paradoxes of evaluation systems should not come as a surprise if one is familiar with evaluation theory and models.

I would like to see further studies on how the power and the benefits of evaluation are negotiated within the field of evaluation and in contacts with other professions, managers, different stakeholders and policy makers. Some evaluators have hinted at a gap between the academic discourse on evaluation and the conditions for evaluation in the world called "practice", which the following comment on a workshop on evaluation theory and methods may illustrate: "It was wonderful, but we don't work in this way". There are also examples of how evaluation expertise initially appears to be acknowledged but is then diminished: "You know so much", a person in a position of power said drawing a circle, "but we need this – a bureaucrat", and then drew a tiny square within the circle.

The power and benefits of evaluation may be seen as a potential. As seeds. To find out how occupational contexts have to be organised to provide optimal conditions for bringing the power and benefits of evaluation to life we need to bring in a variety of voices from this multi-faceted field called evaluation.

References

Magdalenić, Sanja (2019). "Professionalization of evaluation in Sweden revisited". Presentation at the 2019 SVUF Conference, Stockholm, Sweden.