Challenges of evaluation in welfare services: a case of adult social work

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Abstract

The paper ponders the impacts of knowledge production in the effectiveness evaluation of welfare services on the municipal decision-making. Adult social work has been chosen as a case example of services. Theoretical framework draws from realist evaluation. The paper concludes that there are challenges to bring the relevant knowledge for the decision-making. Thus, the relation between knowledge production and decision-making should be discussed more widely.

Keywords: realist evaluation, knowledge production, knowledge practices, welfare services, adult social work

Introduction

Bent Flybjerg (2002, 53) argues that instrumental rationality has strengthened at the expense of value rationality since the Enlightenment. This might be a problem, if value rationality is a premise for the development of society as Aristotle suggested. Both types of rationality are significant for welfare services, as the insight of rationality guides public policy and the ways how the operations of the public sector are guided. In a tight economic situation, there is a desire to use the resources effectively. This might give too much importance for economic factors in assessments.

In this paper, I scrutinize knowledge production in welfare services. Effectiveness evaluation in adult social work is a case example, which illustrates connections between the context, knowledge practices and knowledge production. The social services for the adults are locally organized by municipalities, and thus there are various models and practices. In a sense, the adult social work is a critical case. If the model of evaluation is working in adult social services, it should be applied to other social services. Herein, the argument is that knowledge production has an effect on the way how adult social work is seen in the decision-making and further, it affects those circumstances in which social work is carried out.

One aim of the evaluation research is to help the decision-making (Rossi et al. 1999, 4–5). Social scientists are often quite cautious to give strong recommendations for the decision-makers. It calls for courage to present guidelines based on the restricted models of the complex world. The
background of this paper is in ontological politics. Basically this means that the realities are seen enacted, not fixed or singular (Hinchliffe & Whatmore 2006, 124). For instance, in evaluation the challenge is to take into account non-calculable factors of the welfare services; the factors which are often related to quality. Too often the factors that can easily be measured (e.g. costs, the amount of given services, working hours) are included in the evaluations at the expense of the qualitative factors.

**Knowledge production, knowledge practices and realist evaluation**

*Knowledge production*, like research or evaluation, is an intervention in the world therefore it is not insignificant what kind of classifications or terms are used. The choices might influence on willingness of the city dwellers engage in the policy (Hinchcliffe & Whatmore 2006, 136). *Knowledge practices* are herein understood as administrative or political process with an aim to produce and process knowledge (See Wagenaar & Cook 2003). The concept of knowledge practice combines the use or invocation and the making of knowledge (knowledge production). This is why the ellipses are partly overlapping in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The relation of context, knowledge practices and knowledge production.

The interested parties shape knowledge practices, and thus they have an effect on produced knowledge. A social worker and a client are the main actors in social work. In general, knowledge practices are formed by the scientists as well as funding agencies, investors and decision-makers (Wagenaar & Cook 2003; Jasanoff 2004). Furthermore, Figure 1 assumes that social order is reproduced constantly in a dialogue between the actor and the context, in the practices (Wagenaar & Cook 2003, 140–152; Knorr Cetina 2001, 176–187). In addition, information and knowledge are differentiated; knowledge needs a subject as it presupposes a knower, whereas information could be interpreted as a matter which can be stored, transmitted, applied and encoded. Information transforms to knowledge when it is known by the actor.

The evaluation of welfare services aims at better practices in the service production. Evidence-based or evidence-informed work has been one trend in social work. However, adult social work is so complex that applying evidence-based methods might be frustrating as measures available are
focusing on narrowly defined phenomena (e.g. evaluation of gambling addiction) (See Shawn 2005, 73–93).

Figure 1 clarifies factors which are central in the context of adult social work. Municipal decision-makers can have strong impact on administration, organization and resource allocations. However, the goals and the objects of social work as well as work procedures are contextual factors, but often discussed on the national level. In an ideal situation, the social work methods are influenced by the knowledge practices and knowledge production, and produced knowledge has effect on context (via decision-making mechanism), which then influence the social work methods in question. Figure 1 illustrates these factors.

The approach of realist evaluation acknowledges the contextual factors, and is rooted in realism. The main task is to reduce complexity of the real world. In other words, the goal is to identify causal mechanisms, recognize influential factors and point out the outcomes of action. As Ray Pawson and Nick Tilley (2004, 1–2) write, realist evaluation asks “What works for whom in what circumstances and in what respects and how?” In the next section, I will ponder the adult social work from the angle of realist evaluation.

**Realist evaluation and decision-making**

Realist evaluation doesn’t solve the problem of the complexity of real life but its main goal is to reduce complexities by focusing on mechanisms, context and outcomes at the same time (van der Knaap et al. 2008, 50–51). David Silverman has argued that social scientists should avoid research topics given by the public administration, inasmuch as the formulation of research question steer the results. The research designs on current topics demand political and contextual sensitivity; the first one refers to researcher’s ability to understand the vested interest of the administration. Latter, contextual sensitivity means being conscious of varying meanings of institutions depending on context. Furthermore, the social life with its participants interacts with context (Silverman 1993, 2–8). I argue that the realist evaluation approach acknowledges the changing context, and may therefore be suitable for the evaluation of welfare services.

Pawson and Tilley (1997, 63) suggest that social programmes are social systems. Programmes are characterized by interplay between individual and institution; interaction between an agent and the structure. Reality is stratified, and therefore the notion of explanatory mechanism is needed. Furthermore, we should admit that understanding the programme mechanism is impossible without taking into account individual choices in the social world. The outcomes of the programmes are
combinations of tasks of the programme, the individual choices and the context. In the cases of social programmes or welfare services, it is necessary to include context or pre-existing conditions (cf. an idea of mechanism in an experimental evaluation).

Approach of realist evaluation acknowledges the complexity of society by using the concept of generative causality. Basically, generative causality means that the aim of evaluation is to understand why programmes work in some conditions rather than others. The approach highlights the meaning of the context when it emphasizes the variation also within programmes, not just between different programmes (Pedersen & Rieper 2008, 271–272, 276).

**Adult social work as a context**

As mentioned above, there is plenty of variation in organizing adult social work nationwide in Finland. “National Survey of Adult Social Work” reveals that substance abusers, the unemployed and the long-term unemployed and young people are the main client groups. Social workers and social counselors work with one-off encounters as well as regular clients. In the latter cases, the social work involves the client’s life management, income issues, unemployment, substance abuse and addictions. One part of the social worker’s job is networking with other authorities, as the problems of the clients are often multifaceted. Hence the adult social work represents a welfare service which realized in various ways, and is not strictly regulated (cf. child welfare and legislative regulation) (Blomgren & Kivipelto 2012, 8–9). The municipalities can organize services by themselves or produce them together. This partially explains the variation in social services. Furthermore, there is a difference in the need for the services in small towns compared to Helsinki; for instance, homeless people lives mostly in the cities; in 2010 approximately 45% of all Finnish homeless people lived in Helsinki (ARA 2011, 6).

One part of social work is acknowledging lay knowledge. A client knows his or her life history and has everyday experience of managing with low income. However, the relationship can hardly be equal. The social worker has power to define which services for the client is eligible for or if discretionary benefits are needed (Wilson et al. 2008, 67–70). In an ideal situation, interaction between a client and a social worker produces empowerment. The social worker finds modes to support the client in a way which strengthens his or her life management skills. Lay knowledge and expert knowledge should combine in evaluation.

Both statistical and qualitative research material are needed in order to get a general view from adult social work. The statistical research material is needed to understand the whole picture. For
instance, national registers enable follow-up, and by combining information from different registers it is possible to understand, what other services clients are using or what is the ratio between the long and short-term clients. However, the use of register data requires permissions and analyses take time. The results can hardly represent current situation in the field. Furthermore, register data cannot give sufficient information to regenerate local services even though it might reveal interesting differences. Moreover, the qualitative approach is needed when finding out what are the reasons for the differences, the reality behind the numbers.

In the evaluation of adult social work it is challenging to understand or to verify the multifaceted causal relations. In other words, it is not unusual that several factors are actually influencing the outcomes of intervention. In this sense, the adult social work is quite typical example of the welfare services.

**Three cases of adult social work**

The data in this section based on documents of the project implemented by the National Institute for Health and Welfare with the help of three local pilots. The task of the project was to develop case-specific measures for the effectiveness evaluation of adult social work. The methods were tested in real life situation when the project was implemented 2011–2012. The effectiveness was defined as goal-oriented in all three cases. Goal-oriented effectiveness presupposes that client and social worker are both setting the goals and are participating in the evaluation. Therefore goal-oriented evaluation supports the basic idea of empowering social work (Kivipelto & Karjalainen 2012).

The basic idea of the project was to generate information directly from practical work. The approach of realist evaluation enables scrutinizing the context and mechanism in tandem, yet a realist evaluator is interested in the outcomes as well. The outcomes are influenced by client’s reasoning (e.g. values, beliefs and attitudes) and resources (e.g. information, skills and material resources). For instance, if a client is not willing to co-operate with a social worker or a social councillor, it is hardly possible to achieve outcomes.

All three cases are somewhat different. Cases 1 and 3 are located in relatively small towns whereas case 2 is situated in one of the social service centres of Helsinki. In case 3 the focus is in rehabilitative work and clients are mostly young adults, in the two other cases the clientele is more heterogeneous (Kivipelto & Karjalainen 2012). The summary of the cases is in the table below.
Table 1. Summary of the cases in the project

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<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Client and social worker fill questionnaire together</td>
<td>Social worker/s</td>
<td>Clients, social workers, partners</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is used information?</th>
<th>Case 1. Seinäjoki</th>
<th>Case 2. West Helsinki, Haaga</th>
<th>Case 3. Tuusula</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online questionnaire</td>
<td>KUVASTIN-forms, reflecting group conversation</td>
<td>Client-specific forms (rehabilitative work plans, service plans etc.) + mechanism table + interviews</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

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<tr>
<th>When/where information is produced?</th>
<th>Case 1. Seinäjoki</th>
<th>Case 2. West Helsinki, Haaga</th>
<th>Case 3. Tuusula</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>During appointment at the social office</td>
<td>By the social worker who fills in forms, group conversations</td>
<td>At the social office</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is a form of gathered information?</th>
<th>Case 1. Seinäjoki</th>
<th>Case 2. West Helsinki, Haaga</th>
<th>Case 3. Tuusula</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Includes qualitative and quantitative parts</td>
<td>Includes mostly qualitative parts</td>
<td>Includes qualitative and quantitative parts</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The online programme includes reporting tool</td>
<td>Social workers in the group</td>
<td>Social workers, researcher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case specific information</th>
<th>Case 1. Seinäjoki</th>
<th>Case 2. West Helsinki, Haaga</th>
<th>Case 3. Tuusula</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Two rounds; evaluation I and evaluation II, the programme includes reporting tool which compiles the summaries of data.</td>
<td>Aim is to find ways to utilize tacit knowledge and analyze social work reflectively.</td>
<td>Identification of the working mechanisms in rehabilitative social work, programme evaluation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Three cases: Evaluation of the adult social work**

**Knowledge practices**

Knowledge practices are practices used in social work to gather information and use it in every day work as well as in the research. In an ideal situation, social work is evidence based or knowledge based, and thus the information produced should be analysed as a part of everyday work.
In case one, clients participate actively when they fill the online questionnaire together with the social worker. The questionnaire allows the adding of extra questions. The social worker and the client are able to write qualitative observations and they can mark if they have different views about the situation of the client. The main themes of the questionnaire are the goals, the circumstantial factors and the methods of social work. In the first phase, the social worker and the client set the goals together and in the second phase they assess how the goals have been achieved. The preliminary experiences show that the questionnaire brings out themes which otherwise could easily be left out. For instance, labour market situation may be understood as a prohibitive factor for employment instead of considering the unemployment as fault of the individual. On the other hand, the social workers reported that filling the questionnaire took time, and the use of the method was described burdensome.

In case two, the method Kuvastin shows the multifaceted field of social work. It clarifies the contradictory position of a social worker. The social workers should implement national and local public policy and empower a client. Sometimes these two aims might contradict each other, especially in the short term. For instance, a young client might have good life management skills but doesn’t see any point to seek higher education or work when the social benefits enable a sufficient standard of living. The social worker can reduce benefits in order to encourage the client to work or study. However, reducing benefits might harm the relationship between the client and the worker, which might be a problem in the long term. Moreover, the client might end up in an education which would be much more useful for somebody else, or the client may drop out. Kuvastin offers an opportunity to reflect tricky cases with other social workers. It illuminates the variations between the opinions of social workers. They have to make decisions in constant pressure and decide to which extent they want to implement a policy if it contradicts with the ethical principles of social work.

In the third case, the clients are young adults. All clients get an assessment of the situation at first. The aim is to find the proper procedures of rehabilitative social work. This case is similar with the case one in a sense that the gathered information is mostly quantitative. Instead of an online questionnaire, the clients and social workers fill in paper sheets. The basic idea is to utilize existing methods. The work with young adults is regulated by legislation more strictly than the adult social work. This enables the use of the table of mechanism. The main themes in the table are function/method, target group, the potential mechanism of change, probable impact and other notations. According to preliminary results, the use of this instrument is burdensome for the social workers. However, it has brought up matters which could have otherwise been unnoticed, for
instance lack of the needed services. There is no point in drawing a plan on needed services if the services are unavailable.

**Knowledge production**

Different knowledge practices produce huge amount of information. Information transforms into knowledge in social work when it is used as a base for the social worker’s decisions or in decision-making. We can produce knowledge for instance in evaluation or research. However, we are dependent on knowledge practices. This paper describes, three different ways to produce information for evaluation.

Firstly, it can be noticed that formulation of the questionnaire has an effect on conversation between the social worker and the client. In these cases, the questionnaire adds matters to be dealt with. Secondly, the questionnaire illuminates the lack of the services needed. Thirdly, the social worker’s dual role as a bureaucrat and a supporter is highlighted. Even though we can agree that these are relevant observations improving the practices of social work, the next question is, if these observations have any significance for the decision-making. It won’t make a difference if the produced knowledge doesn’t have any effect on the context.

**Context**

In these three cases, the combining concept is *adult social work*. However, adult social work is carried out under various circumstances. The administrative structure is different in small towns compared to the administration of the capital city. The legislation regulates the competence requirements of social workers in Finland. In towns, it is common that social councilors are employed as social workers or they do adult social work as social councilors. In Helsinki the situation is somewhat different, as the task of the social councilors is to *guide* clients and the rest of the work carried out by social workers. The duties of social workers and social councilors are (and probably will be) under constant debate. Furthermore, it is also reasonable to assume that the size of the municipality has an effect on resource allocation.

Even though there are some differences between the contexts of the cases, there are similarities too. The goals and objects of social work and basic procedures do not change, as these are partly regulated nationally. In addition, the social workers are educated at the universities and social work is based on research knowledge. However, the administration, organizations and resource allocation
are influenced by the local decision-makers. The decision-making enables or obviates the use of social work methods, which is why the next section will concentrate on relation between the knowledge production and context.

**The lack of feedback mechanism**

The preliminary results of the project indicate that these knowledge practices are useful yet burdensome in every day work. In principle, the methods can be used as a part of the work. Obviously, this will demand some additional effort and time, as research and development work always does. Furthermore, the measures support interaction between a client and a social worker.

However, it is reasonable to ask if produced knowledge helps to make better decisions on the municipal level. In this picture, it is difficult to discover the mechanism from knowledge production to the decision-making or further to the context. Instead of the overlapping processes (like in Figure 1), in these cases, the knowledge practices seems to be in tight interaction with knowledge production, but the connection to context via decision-making appears unclear. In other words, the produced knowledge doesn’t have an influence on decision-making and further to the context. This might be a problem, as the context has an impact on the availability of the welfare services.

Relevant knowledge is needed to steer resources in the best possible way. Information technology has facilitated knowledge production. However, there is not solid evidence that gathered information is analysed and used as a base for the decision-making. From the angle of adult social work, there is an urgent need for computer software which is easy to use and, could be used together with clients. It should also give statistical information concerning adult social work. Moreover, it should be able to produce information needed in the decision-making as well. It might be difficult to purchase a system which would be adaptable enough for various needs. Previous research has shown that knowledge relating to nature is in constant change, so the changes are even more probable in the service structures made by humans (Hinchliffe et al. 2005). The challenge is to get a database which would be flexible enough for the current demands and more importantly, it should be able to combine the demands for different kinds of information.

The decision-makers of the municipalities seem to be mostly interested in financial factors. Even though the interest for public policy goes often deeper, the decision-making structures formulate agendas solely for the economic questions. In Flybjerg’s terms, instrumental rationality is the ruling form of rationality; there is no place for value rationality. It is reasonable to ask, if it is possible to produce more detailed knowledge from social work, in such a way that its impacts are more visible
to decision-makers. Indeed, there is a danger that the measures set more weight on economic actors at the expense of ethical consideration. The decision-makers should be convinced that the values should be part of the political debate. More importantly, ethics and economy do not necessarily conflict with each other, for instance easy access to intoxicant rehabilitation could be an ethical choice but also save some money in the long run.

**Lessons learned**

I was interested in the question: How to produce knowledge which gives opportunity to improve welfare services when it is clear that it is not possible to evaluate everything. The evaluation makes operations visible but might at the same time hide things which have been left out from the evaluation. This is why we should be aware of choices made in the evaluation. Furthermore, we should discuss constantly if the produced knowledge is a part of everyday work as well as the decision-making. Furthermore, we should be aware of possible flaws in the ways the information is gathered or utilized. The measures of the evaluation influence the ways the problems are perceived in the social services and the decision-making, and there should be more discussion concerning the type of rationality the decisions are based on.

**Bibliography**


Figure 1. The relation of context, knowledge practices and knowledge production.
A photograph of the author