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Evaluation procedures in RAISD – theory and practice

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Objectives of today's session

- 1) To understand the theoretical framework guiding the evaluation procedures in the RAISD project
- 2) To be able to apply the theory into practice



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How to achieve these objectives?

- 1) Theory: Presenting the basic principles of realist evaluation
- 2) Practice: Presenting how these principles can be applied in RAISD
- 3) Exercise: Working with a real life or a fictional case
- 4) Discussion

Theoretical framework – basic questions in evaluation

- Evaluation = defining the value of a certain program/intervention/pilot
- Might sound simple but is not: An evaluator is stuck with the complexities and messiness of everyday life
 - a) Usually little happens: Countless number of intruding variables and issues related to structural conditions might nullify the effects of the most impressive program
 - b) If desired changes do happen, how to know what has caused them?
 - c) If the program has caused desired changes and if one is able to prove this, how to rework it in another contexts?

Theoretical framework – the wretched problem of complexity

- Repairing a car might be a **complicated** thing to do but intervening the everyday life of people is a task ridden by **complexity**
- Every program is embedded in some context including institutions, structures, other programs and different groups of people and their interests
- An evaluator need to be aware of these complexities in order to assess their significance – not to control them (because it is often impossible)
- Contexts as an object of study, not a bunch of simple factors to be tamed

Theoretical framework – excluding some approaches

- Finding an evaluation theory fitting the framework of the RAISD-project
 - Participatory, multi-stakeholder and tailored small-scale solutions in very different contexts with different groups of people and institutions
- A need to exclude purely positivist, empiricist and top-down stances of natural sciences (RCT as a 'golden standard' of evaluation)
 - Answering the 'what works' question with numbers big enough
 - Suppresses the complexity, suffers from context-blindness and often excludes participatory stances
- A need to exclude purely constructivist, relativist and bottom-up stances of social sciences
 - Answering the 'how is it perceived' question
 - Might be context-sensitive and participatory but little knowledge is often produced about the concrete outcomes and change provoking effects that the program might have instigated

Theoretical framework – the realist approach (1)

- Realism as an epistemology = Some kind of objective reality (independent of human mind) exists but might be unobservable and might have different consequences according to a context.
- Realism as a science = to theorise observable regularities and their exceptions in certain contexts during certain times, not to claim universal truths → fallible realism
 - Realist slogan: 'What works for whom and in which contexts'
- The usual example: Gun powder do not always blow up when flame is applied. The context and several other variables matter as well.
- Thus, it is not about 'successionist' causality (gun powder + flame = blow) but a 'generative' one (gun powder in a right context blow up if flame is applied)

Theoretical framework – the realist approach (2)

- Studying the *generative potential* of certain programs:
 - Instead of trying to reveal 'successionist' causality' (A causes B because the occurrence of A is followed by the occurrence of B), the aim is to explore '*generative causation*' (B follows A because of operation of certain mechanisms).
- Mechanisms
 - Mechanisms bring effects in programs.
 - Often not directly observable and need to be theoretically explained
 - Mechanisms are not the results of a program as such but possible responses of various stakeholders. Programs thus might activate certain mechanisms.
- Realist slogan says that 'interventions do not work, it is the interpretations of their subjects that produce results'. Consequently, people are seen as actors in their real-life settings, not passive recipients of some exterior interventions.

The practice – applying the realist perspective

- Basic principles
 - Doing research in real life settings with real people living their everyday lives (not in laboratories)
 - Focusing not only on outcomes but also processes while opening the 'black box' of the program
 - Paying attention to the generative potential of the program
- Concretely
 - Carefully documenting the perspectives of various stakeholders and the contextual factors surrounding them
 - Using mixed-methods and engaging with the key stakeholders to understand their responses to the program (method neutrality)
 - Analyzing the resources the programs might provide for people and how they are utilized

The practice – applying the realist perspective in RAISD (1)

- Determining the 'vulnerability context' and setting a program theory
 - Why should the program achieve the desired outcomes? What there is in the context that might make the program work for certain people?
- Working with the key stakeholders and determining evaluation criteria
 - Process criteria: How the programs should be implemented and what should happen during the implementation?
 - Outcome criteria: What should be the effects of the program?

The practice – applying the realist perspective in RAISD (2)

Process evaluation	Description
Accessibility	The level of ease the program is reached by beneficiaries
Acceptability	How the program is perceived by the beneficiaries
Empowerment	What types of resources the program provides or what types of changes it provokes for the beneficiaries
Viability	Feasibility of the program from the service provider perspective
Outcome evaluation	
Capability	To what extent the program increase beneficiaries' autonomy in the context of host communities?
Inclusion	To what extent the program promote societal participation of beneficiaries?
Capacity	To what extent the program enhances competences/skills of beneficiaries?
Competence	To what extent the program enhances competences/skills of service providers?

The practice – applying the realist perspective in RAISD (3)

Process evaluation	Concrete objects of study
Accessibility	Number of beneficiaries & distributions of them + ease of access/use & non-discrimination + potential beneficiaries not reached
Acceptability	Adherence and withdrawal rates + information on how needs are matched + how the program is received
Empowerment	How the program is used and for what purposes + what kind of resources or recognition the program provide for the beneficiaries
Viability	Frequency and ease of providing the program + the number of cross-professional contacts + how the program match with professional/institutional culture
Outcome evaluation	
Capability	Change in the level of autonomy (e.g. perceived ability to cope in one's surroundings and belief in one's abilities in the future)
Inclusion	Change in the level of community engagement + change in employment or educational status + change in the level of access to services
Capacity	Change in the level of knowledge on local opportunities and rights + change in language skills and societal/cultural awareness
Competence	Learning instigated by providing the program + professional/institutional transformation

Exercise: Working with an existing or fictional case

- 1) Random assignment into breakout rooms of 3-4 people
- 2) Choose a program one of you is already working with OR pick a fictional case
- 3) Have a discussion on two things
 - a. The main aim of the program and how to evaluate its success in reaching it
 - b. How to open the 'black box' of the intervention and evaluate it as a process
- 4) If you wish, use the Flinga platform to check your task and find the fictional cases
 - <https://edu.flinga.fi/s/EGN39N6>

Exercise: Fictional cases

- a. Online counselling provided by a local NGO to enhance asylum seekers' awareness on their rights concerning international protection
- b. Fostering cross-professional co-operation between workers in the social and health care sectors in order to develop a more holistic approach to wellbeing of traumatized refugees
- c. Setting up a 'multicultural' cafe with childcare services in order to promote interaction between forcibly displaced single mothers and host population

Discussion

- Realist evaluation = an endeavor to grasp the inevitable complexity related to every program or intervention
- Answering not only the 'what works' question but also why a program might work, for whom it might work and in which kind of contexts it might work
 - Requires mixed-methods, multiple datasets, contextual knowledge and – most importantly – engagement with the field of study
- 'Fallible' realism while acknowledging the limited nature of evaluation practice

Some further reading

- An easily digestible webpage: https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/approach/realist_evaluation
- Literature:
 - Astbury, B., & Leeuw, F. (2010). Unpacking Black Boxes: Mechanisms and Theory Building in Evaluation. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 31(3), 363-381.
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