Chapter 3

Participation of marginalized groups in evaluation: Mission impossible?

Vivianne E. Baur
Tineke A. Abma
Guy A.M. Widdershoven

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Abstract

Responsive evaluation facilitates a dialogical process by creating social conditions that enhance equal input from all stakeholders. However, when multiple stakeholders are involved, some groups tend to go unheard or not be taken seriously. In these cases, empowerment of the more silent voices is needed. The inclusion of marginalized groups in evaluation is thus a challenge for evaluators. It raises questions about how to include all stakeholders in the evaluation process in a way that empowers marginalized stakeholder groups, and at the same time is acceptable for the dominant stakeholder groups. In this article we describe our experiences with a responsive evaluation project on the participation of client councils in policy processes in a Dutch residential care and nursing home organization. We focus on the value of hermeneutic dialogue (fostering mutual understanding and learning processes) in addressing the challenges of working with stakeholders in unequal relationships.
1. Participation of ‘marginalized groups’ in evaluation

The participation and ownership of multiple stakeholders in evaluation is increasingly being promoted.\textsuperscript{1,2} Involving multiple stakeholders, including those with ‘marginalized’ or ‘silenced’ voices, is a challenging task for evaluators due to unequal power relationships\textsuperscript{3-10} and the risk of conflict.\textsuperscript{11,12} One way to deal with asymmetrical power relationships in evaluation is through negotiation among stakeholder groups.\textsuperscript{5,6,11,12} However, attempts to apply a negotiation approach to involve less dominant stakeholders are not always successful. Koch\textsuperscript{5} describes three evaluation projects in elderly care in which the Fourth Generation Evaluation\textsuperscript{13} methodology was used to involve older people in the negotiation process. Their involvement had been hampered by a lack of confidence to share their claims, concerns and issues publicly. It eventuated that being acknowledged as a person through their stories was, in fact, more important for older people than simply ‘having a say’ and taking part in the negotiating process. Thus, when one group of stakeholders does not feel the urge or the security to engage in the negotiation process, relationships remain unbalanced or become even more asymmetric.

How, then, can these asymmetric relations be dealt with in evaluation? To what extent is the participation of marginalized groups in evaluation possible? In this article we describe the value of a responsive approach that focuses on hermeneutic dialogue (fostering mutual understanding and learning processes) instead of negotiation. Hermeneutic dialogue is deliberately rooted in practice and is context-bound.\textsuperscript{14} Therefore, we focus on responsive evaluation of the involvement of client councils in interactive policy processes in Dutch residential care homes and nursing homes.

2. Responsive evaluation

2.1 Background and goals

We were asked by a residential care and nursing home organization in the south of the Netherlands to evaluate how the participation of client councils in policy processes was experienced, and how it could be improved. Our evaluation thus aimed to bring forth recommendations for practical improvement of the participation of client councils in
decision-making processes. However, it rapidly emerged that the client councils felt that they were not taken seriously by managers. The empowerment of the client councils consequently became another goal of the evaluation.

The involvement of older people in policy processes in care organizations through client councils\(^1\) raises specific questions related to the interactions between members of client councils and managers. Developments in care organizations (strategic alliances, alterations) complicate policy issues; the range of decisions increases and the implications have greater impact on clients’ lives. This means that a lot of time is needed to consult the client councils adequately, and that both the Board of Directors and the members of the client councils have to invest more energy in constructive discussions. In the organization in which we conducted our evaluation, the Board of Directors felt that the client councils hampered the policymaking processes. For instance, explaining complicated policy plans in understandable language took extra time and effort. At the same time, the members of the client councils felt frustrated by the complex and lengthy policy reports. They felt marginalized within the organization. One could argue that client councils in the Netherlands cannot, by definition, be marginalized, because their power and influence are supported by law. However, client councils indeed find that, in practice, there is more to having a voice and being taken seriously than merely having legislative backing. Thus, the tensions between managers and client councils gave rise to the request of the central client council and the Board of Directors for an evaluation of their joint practice.

The evaluation team consisted of Baur, Abma and Widdershoven. The evaluation was conducted over a period of six months in 2006 by Baur under the supervision of Abma and Widdershoven. At that time, the care organization had eight separate locations, with 3316 clients (totaling 1085 fte in staff). Two locations were nursing homes for older people with physical and/or mental health problems. The other six locations were residential care departments, sometimes combined with sheltered home facilities. Each location had its own local client council. These client councils consisted of six to eight members, usually three or

\(^{1}\) In the Netherlands, user involvement of clients in the social and care sector is laid down by law (Wet Medezeggenschap Clienten Zorgsector). This law aims to provide clients in this sector with legal rights to participate in the related policy and practice through advice and assent.
four residents and four or five relatives/volunteers. There were two exceptions, however, in the nursing homes: these solely comprised relatives (spouses and partners) and volunteers, due to the high degree of the residents’ physical and mental impediments. Throughout the whole organization, the average age of residents was 80+. Apart from these eight local client councils, the organization had also instituted a central client council to cover the more complex and overarching policy issues. This central council consisted of two representatives from each local client council. Only relatives and volunteers were members of the central council; residents were permitted to take part, but this tended to be too much of a burden in terms of energy, time and subject matter. The local client councils held monthly gatherings (mostly together with the manager) to discuss the policy issues and give advice or assent. The central client council assembled with the Board of Directors bi-monthly.

The seven managers of the eight locations of this organization (one manager was in charge of two locations) all participated in the evaluation through individual interviews and, for four of them, through participation in the dialogue groups (see Table 1). All were very open to the evaluation. That only four participated in the dialogue groups was due to their busy schedules, which did not allow their participation at that time. With regard to the client council members, the same individuals who took part in the homogeneous group also participated in the heterogeneous group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April – August 2006</td>
<td>Creating social conditions and generating stakeholder issues</td>
<td>Participant observations of council gatherings and group interviews with local client council (one per location, total: 8)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Participant observation of central client council gathering (1)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>In-depth interviews with various stakeholders (total: 14: members of local client councils, member of central client council, managers, member of Board of Directors, member of Board of Trustees, member of management team)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August – October 2006</td>
<td>Homogeneous groups</td>
<td>One storytelling workshop with 14 members of local client councils One focus group with 4 local managers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2006</td>
<td>Heterogeneous group</td>
<td>One storytelling workshop with members of local client councils, members of central client council, local managers, member of management team and Board of Directors (total: 15)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
2.2 Theoretical framework

We used responsive evaluation methodology to make the evaluation project accessible for all stakeholders. We consider responsive evaluation to be a democratic and participatory approach to evaluation that reflects a value-committed stance on the part of evaluators, working for social justice, equality, empowerment and emancipation.\(^{15}\) Within these kinds of participatory approaches to evaluation, a distinction exists between practice participatory evaluation (P-PE) and transformative participatory evaluation (T-PE).\(^{1}\) In T-PE, evaluators demonstrate commitment to democratize social change and to empower people through participation in the process of constructing and respecting their own knowledge.\(^{1}\) In this sense, T-PE makes a more explicit commitment to effecting democratic social change than P-PE. Our use of responsive evaluation illustrates a form of T-PE. In this project we strived for social change (improvements in the interactions between and practices of client councils and managers) based on the experiential knowledge of multiple stakeholders. Further (as mentioned above), the empowerment of client councils was another goal of our evaluation project.

The roots of responsive evaluation lie in the 1970s. Calling for a wider scope for evaluation than mere goal-oriented evaluation, Stake\(^{16}\) introduced a responsive approach as part of his vision for educational research and evaluation. Central to this vision is the broadening of evaluation criteria to as many stakeholder issues as possible, unlike evaluation models which merely include the goals and intentions of policymakers. In responsive evaluation, processes, backgrounds and judgments are included as well, rather than a focus on simply measuring outcomes.\(^{17,18}\) These ideas have been further developed by others; Guba and Lincoln,\(^{13}\) for example, built on Stake’s work, proposing an interactive approach in which stakeholder issues are a departure point for negotiation to enhance mutual understanding and consensus. In our project we used a particular version of responsive evaluation, linking the responsive evaluation paradigm\(^{13,16}\) to insights about narratives, storytelling and ongoing dialogues in evaluation.\(^{19-22,10}\) The latter approach uses hermeneutic dialogue to engage stakeholders in a learning process to help them better understand themselves and each other, and hence place their own viewpoints in perspective. Stakeholders thus gain a better understanding of a given practice through the combination and amalgamation of various perspectives.
From a hermeneutic perspective, human life is essentially a process of understanding. Through stories, people make sense of their world and are interconnected with each other. Hermeneutic dialogue takes the complexity of human life (embedded in their stories and experiences) as a starting point for mutual learning processes in which all stakeholders change by way of interaction with one another. Change and learning processes occur when people extend their horizons by appropriating new perspectives. Dialogue in this hermeneutic sense is an ongoing and cyclical process among stakeholders, aiming at reciprocal understanding and acceptance. Consensus is not the ultimate goal of this kind of evaluation, as it is never an absolute value—conditions change over time and a lack of consensus and ambiguities, expressed through the narratives of stakeholders, generate reasons to interact and continue ongoing dialogues.

2.3 Four steps in the responsive evaluation project

Responsive evaluation involves four steps: (1) creating social conditions, (2) generating stakeholder issues, (3) conducting homogeneous dialogue groups to discuss issues among those with converging interests, and (4) conducting heterogeneous dialogue groups to bring perspectives together to enhance mutual understanding and learning. We used a cyclical way of working: outcomes of former steps were used for next steps to validate, refine and integrate the various stakeholder issues. In this evaluation, we combined the first two steps, as in practice they usually overlap. In the first stage of the project, Baur attended one regular gathering of each local client council and one regular gathering of the central client council to introduce herself and the project to the client council members, to identify the stakeholder groups (local client councils, central client council, managers at top level and at location level) and to gain a first insight into the stakeholder issues and interactions. This is an important phase in responsive evaluation because people are often distant to evaluators, who are traditionally seen as experts who come to judge people and their ways of acting and thinking. For example, some members of client councils expressed their concern that they would be judged or somehow ‘graded’ by the evaluator. Inviting them to be part of the evaluation and being transparent about the goals and methodology of the project removed such concerns. Further, continuous attention to these sensitivities and the fostering of openness helped build trust and enthusiasm. Though trust and enthusiasm cannot easily
be measured, the evaluator (Baur) found the interactions with stakeholders to be positive: all stakeholders were willing to participate, they spoke freely about their concerns being in or dealing with a client council, and many spontaneously emphasized the significance of the evaluation at various moments. When the evaluator briefly introduced the project during these regular client council gatherings, she also asked the client council members how they felt about being in a local client council. After this, the gatherings proceeded with the regular agenda in the presence of the evaluator, who took field notes of the interaction within the client councils. In this way, the evaluator was able to gain a first impression of the client councils and their issues, which were deepened in the individual interviews.

Besides engaging in participant observation and introducing herself and the project, the evaluator conducted in-depth interviews with all stakeholders to identify stakeholders’ issues (see Table 1 for a more detailed overview of the interviews). The interviews were tape-recorded. Because of time restrictions, they were not entirely transcribed; rather, the evaluator wrote down summaries and selected quotes from the tapes. The issues (themes) and meanings of the stakeholders’ stories (narratives) were then analyzed. To validate the reproduction of the interview and the interpretations by the evaluator, the summaries were sent to the participants for member checking. No changes were made by participants at this stage.

In the third phase of the project, three homogeneous groups of stakeholders were organized; with the local client councils, the central client council, and the managers. Homogeneous groups in responsive evaluation are organized for stakeholders with shared interests to exchange their experiences, and thus (hermeneutically) deepen their mutual understanding in a safe environment. The term homogeneous in this sense does not mean that the participants share all the same characteristics. Rather, it refers to the shared interest that stakeholder groups might have. The value of homogeneous groups is that participants feel free to speak up because they are aware of this shared interest (all being members of client councils, working for the same goals/interests, and experiencing the same obstacles). Moreover, these homogeneous groups help prepare the stakeholders for the subsequent heterogeneous dialogue (i.e., all stakeholders together). Homogeneous groups can take diverse formats, such

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2 The Board of Directors solely consisted of two persons; therefore we did not conduct a separate focus group with this management level.
as a storytelling workshop or a focus group. We decided to attend to the specific needs and communication styles of the stakeholder groups. Thus, we used different formats for the homogeneous group with client councils compared to that for the dialogue among managers. For the managers, we choose to use a focus group instead of a storytelling workshop. This was because it had emerged during the interviews with the managers that they were already very clear and focused about their issues with the client councils. As we show later, by defending or opposing various statements during the focus group, managers found themselves trying to convince each other of the value of the client councils. The statements used were based on the experiences of both managers and client councils that had arisen in the first and second stages of the project. In this way, the managers deepened their own perspectives but also were introduced to the perspectives of client councils.

Members of the client councils, however, defined their issues less clearly during the interviews than the managers. They tended to elaborate on diverse subjects, situations and emotions, using lots of examples. We therefore chose a storytelling approach to explore their experiences; this seemed to better suit their communication styles. Storytelling can be very helpful for older people and their representatives in particular, because it gives people the opportunity to share their experiences and jointly discover common issues. It can help improve practices by bringing to light actual lived experiences. If their stories are listened to, stakeholders also feel that they have been acknowledged as people. Thus, two members of each local client council participated in a homogeneous storytelling workshop organized to gain more in-depth knowledge of their issues and concerns.

To engage participants in the workshop, we introduced one story that expressed the main and common experiences of the client councils. This story was derived from the first and second stages of the responsive evaluation, and formed the basis for dialogue between the participants of the homogeneous groups with the client councils. Besides their own perspectives, the experiences of the other stakeholder groups were also brought into the homogeneous groups to foster mutual awareness and learning. In the storytelling workshop for the client councils, this involved a story about a manager in which the main issues for managers were addressed; while the story was essentially fictitious, it was rooted in the themes arising from the interviews. For the managers, this interchange of perspectives came about through statements...
based on the interviews with the client councils. By confronting these different perspectives, the participants of the homogeneous groups were able to deepen their understanding of their own perspectives and were better prepared for dialogue with other stakeholders.

Finally, in the fourth stage of the process a heterogeneous dialogue group was set up, with members of the local and central client councils, managers and the Board of Directors. The term heterogeneous refers to the diversity of interests and perspectives among the stakeholder groups. To restrict the number of participants for practical reasons, the evaluator selected participants from the client councils on the basis of their articulate yet positive contributions in the homogeneous storytelling workshop. The latter criterion was considered important given that the goal of the heterogeneous dialogue was to build bridges between stakeholder groups. During the heterogeneous dialogue meeting, shared issues were discussed and all stakeholders participated. Interaction was fostered by the appreciative, 'strength-based' approach chosen by the evaluator, which focuses on similarities, collectivity and shared interests; this allows room for the resilience and potential of stakeholders to emerge that might otherwise be overshadowed by frustrations and difference. This constructive focus formed the starting point for all the homogeneous groups as well as the heterogeneous group. Further, the exchange of perspectives in the dialogue group made visible the social learning process, which we describe in the next section.

3. Case example: stakeholder issues and learning processes

In this section we describe the main stakeholder issues that arose. The frustrations between managers and client councils can be understood by examining the underlying divergence of value stances among these stakeholders concerning their practices. In responsive evaluation, these underlying values and tensions are brought to light through the dialogical process. Only then can differences be recast as vehicles for learning.

3.1 Issues

The tensions between large-scale policy decisions and the daily lives of clients is an important issue confronting client councils and managers, both of whom have different outlooks
on what kind of subjects they relate to. Whereas the client councils’ main focus is on the daily lives of clients at local level, the managers’ focus combines the policy interests of the organization at central level and the daily lives of clients on location. In other words, they have different value stances towards what matters most: the daily lives of clients in the here and now, or the strategic continuation of the organization in the future.

It also became clear that most managers and client councils communicated in terms of top-down information exchange. In top-down communication, the client council members are not actively involved in the decision-making process, as the process is overshadowed by the information-giving attitudes of managers. The degree of participation is therefore low and may even be called tokenistic. This is a frustrating process for both parties. The challenge for the evaluation team, then, was to turn these seemingly opposed outlooks and communication problems into vehicles for mutual learning.

3.2 Stakeholders’ learning processes

The responsive evaluation enhanced the mutual learning processes for the client councils and the managers. The storytelling workshop organized for the members of the client councils placed their stories and experiences as central. This fostered a learning process. For example, one client council member shared a success story with the other participants: she explained how her client council had stood up for the cleaning up of the gardens. At first, the client council did not think its request would be fruitful. However, because the council did not withhold its comments on the state of the gardens, and because it stood up for the clients it represented, the manager took care of the problem—and even invited the client council to dinner. This story was inspiring for the other participants in the storytelling workshop. It prompted a dialogue about how client councils could turn the disappointing experience of being let down by managers (leading to a passive attitude on the part of client councils) into a more proactive attitude. The message that the participants formulated for themselves was clear: client councils must speak up for their clients on concrete matters in order to get things done, without giving themselves over completely to managers and their policy issues. This attitude was summarized in the powerful statement by one client council member: ‘No grumbling between ourselves—speak up!’
The storytelling workshop with members of local client councils is an example of hermeneutic dialogue in practice. Hermeneutic dialogue fosters a process of change in the participants as they learn from each other, and signs of this processes of change and learning emerged in the storytelling workshop. Through the dialogue, the council members were inspired to change their own attitudes. They saw that they could take on a different identity: instead of playing victim to the organization’s policy agenda, they could become agents in setting this agenda.

In the homogeneous focus group with the managers, the sometimes contradictory views of the various managers on the value of the client councils functioned as a basis for dialogue and learning. A positive element was brought to the focus group through the examples that managers presented of active involvement by the client councils. For example, one manager shared his experience of taking the client council to the kitchen of another organization, where innovations in food preparation had already been put into practice. The council members could taste the food, look around in the kitchen and speak with the cooks. Being involved in this creative way, the members of the client council felt stimulated to ask questions and to be critical in a constructive manner. The manager reported that this improved his relationship with the client council and fostered a growing awareness of shared interests. After this example, the managers’ dialogue no longer concentrated on the downsides of the client councils (‘notorious complainers’), but focused on means of interaction that had worked well.

### 3.3 Shared learning processes

In the homogeneous dialogue phase of the evaluation, the foundations (empowerment and social learning within one’s ‘own’ group) were laid for the heterogeneous dialogue. Subsequently, the diverse perspectives were shared in the heterogeneous storytelling workshop by way of stories that reflected each perspective. These stories were based on the issues brought forth in the interviews and homogeneous groups. The client councils’ perspective took a central place in the heterogeneous storytelling workshop, which opened with a story of the client councils. In this way, the members of the client councils were made to feel secure, acknowledged and heard.
In the heterogeneous dialogue, the client councils and managers found common ground in their shared interest; namely, the wellbeing of the clients. The discovery that they shared this important issue motivated the participants to jointly sketch some prerequisites for a good and constructive participation process. The most important conclusions were to look for a balance between short- and long-term issues; to pay attention to ongoing dialogue between manager and client council on concrete issues that genuinely matter to the current residents; to find creative ways to support the functioning of the client council; and to communicate openly with each other. This dialogue enhanced mutual understanding of the diversities and similarities between the stakeholders and the underlying values of their issues. The conclusions were then translated by our evaluation team into some practical recommendations. Concerning the communication between and the differing outlooks of the client councils and managers, the recommendations focused on how to sustain the positive interactions that were promoted by the responsive evaluation project.

4. Discussion and conclusions

This project provides insights into how the participation of client councils in residential care and nursing homes might be improved. We can conclude that there is more to the participatory practice of client councils than just having a say and negotiating. Rather, the participation of client councils is a dynamic process. Room should be given to hermeneutic dialogue as well as horizontal and deliberative communication. Further, abstract policy issues do not invite client councils and managers to engage in deliberative dialogues. Therefore, we argue that organizations must find creative ways to place clients’ stories about their daily and concrete experiences on the policy agenda. This encourages client councils to feel that they are being taken seriously, because their experiential knowledge and lived experiences are taken into account.

Besides providing insights into how the joint practice of client councils and managers can be improved, this project shows how marginalized groups can participate fruitfully in evaluation. We argue that there are some important, basic prerequisites for including groups with silent voices in evaluation; these are described below.
4.1 Recognition of multiple stakeholder groups

First, the evaluator should recognize the existence of multiple stakeholder groups. According to social constructivist epistemology, meaning is developed through interactions between people.\textsuperscript{14} Power relations play a significant role in how people define their world.\textsuperscript{21,39,40} Thus, for evaluators who strive to include all stakeholders’ perspectives – to appreciate the full scope of the values that come with the practice being evaluated, and to help improve the relationships among stakeholders and to work for social change – everything starts by identifying whose interests are at stake.

4.2 Start with the marginalized group(s)

Second, if a broad range of stakeholders is identified, the evaluation process should start with the stakeholder group that has the least influence within the power relations.\textsuperscript{41} It is a deliberate choice of responsive evaluators to pay attention to power relations in this way.\textsuperscript{14,42-45} Care is needed in defining who is considered a marginalized group, to avoid stigmatization and exclusion of other groups that may have even less voice. In our project, client councils saw themselves as being marginalized. They were afraid to be judged (which indicates that they felt vulnerable), and central to their issues was the feeling of not being taken seriously by managers. Thus, we decided to pay special attention to this group, in terms of supporting them in being heard. We tried to break through the existing imbalances in the power relations by opening the interviews with the marginalized groups and, in the dialogue meetings, by placing their experiences and perspectives as central. However, we did not take an advocacy position in this regard: instead of speaking for the client councils, we supported them by making room for their experiences and perspectives in a homogeneous storytelling workshop. Through this supportive preparation and by facilitating the heterogeneous group, the dialogue between managers and client councils was able to take place without one party taking the upper hand. Thus, it proved necessary to first give the less powerful the opportunity to bring their issues to the fore.\textsuperscript{41}

Other ways to ensure that all voices are heard during group dialogues are to pay attention to non-verbal communication and react carefully to it (e.g., to take note when a participant tries to contribute but is not given the room to do so, or when someone seems to feel
uncomfortable or disagree but does not dare to say so); to bring focus to the dialogue (i.e., to find a balance between the richness of participants’ experiential stories and the main issues that are the subject of the dialogue); and to turn emotions that might obstruct the dialogue into something constructive (e.g., if someone is very angry and is overshadowing the dialogue with pessimistic and intrusive comments, to ‘translate’ the emotions that seem to be driving this and try to direct the conversation towards questions about what could be done to change the situation for the better).

4.3 Multiple partiality

This leads to a third point of attention for evaluators aiming to support the participation of less powerful groups; namely, to make themselves equally acceptable to the other, more established, stakeholder groups. A responsive evaluator should be able to carry off ‘multiple partiality’. This means that, while paying special attention to marginalized groups, the evaluator should be just as open and approachable to the other stakeholders as well. Thus, building and sustaining good social conditions is essential for responsive evaluation. Some constructive ways to create a good relationship between the evaluator and stakeholders are being present at the location regularly, holding informal talks with stakeholders, engaging in their daily practice, and emphasizing that you are there to help them find solutions rather than to judge them.

4.4 Willingness to share power and control

Another prerequisite for including marginalized groups in evaluation is the willingness of evaluators to share power and control. This starts with the project design. In our project, we followed an emergent design. The issues of the stakeholders were unknown to us beforehand, as were the way in which the imbalanced power relations manifested themselves in practice. Therefore, we were unable to define the exact goals of the evaluation and the specific design before we started the project. We explained this emergent design in a transparent manner to the stakeholders and invited them to be open about what they thought was important for the project to be articulated.
Not only we as evaluators have to share power; the stakeholders themselves also need to be willing to share their power with the evaluator, and with the other stakeholder groups. Stakeholders are not always willing to share power and to open up to an evaluator or other stakeholders. It is important, therefore, to gain trust and to take an appreciative and strength-based approach towards stakeholders. This can be done by explicitly making appeals to the experiential knowledge of the stakeholders, and by emphasizing that the values and meaning that they attach to their practices are always valid and worth putting forth in dialogue with others. Furthermore, evaluators should also look for open-natured people who are able to build bridges towards other stakeholder groups.

4.5 Focus on dialogue as mutual learning by using stories

A final vital aspect of successful participatory evaluation is rooted in the definition of dialogue. Dialogue comes in many forms. Traditional Fourth Generation Evaluation focuses on negotiation among stakeholders. However, when marginalized groups are to be included, the negotiation process can be disappointing. In responsive evaluation, dialogue is not defined as negotiation, but as a means of mutual learning. By using stories and casuistry as a means of learning through concrete cases, the divergent values and experiences of the stakeholders can be brought closer together. Thus, the different experiences of stakeholders change from being impediments to being vehicles for learning and improvement. By taking this hermeneutical dialogical approach, people are able to broaden their own perspectives. Mutual learning through dialogue and narratives can be a fruitful approach if a focus on negotiation does not fit the communication styles of particular stakeholders and their practices.

These prerequisites for the constructive inclusion of marginalized groups in evaluation raise some points for further discussion. The first of these concerns the role of the evaluator. In responsive evaluation, the evaluator usually takes on various roles during the process, interacting with the dynamics of the stakeholders. These roles can vary from anthropologist, conversationalist and careful listener to facilitator of dialogue, Socratic guide and educator. Whatever form this role takes, the evaluator is never a distant expert who merely judges practice; indeed, social interaction may even be considered ‘the
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Point of the evaluation. In this sense, evaluative knowledge is socially constructed and the relational location of the evaluator matters when it comes to the kind of knowledge that is generated. This raises questions about how evaluators justify the normative stance that they take. Evaluations communicate certain norms and values and the evaluator thus inevitably makes choices about the way he or she wishes to be in the social world. In this responsive evaluation project, we took a value-committed stance characterized by the wish for democratization and social change in practice. This stance implies a worldview in which human flourishing (balancing autonomy, cooperation and hierarchy) is central. We acknowledge that we begin with being in our world (before any theoretical reasoning) and are interconnected to that world. Thus, being interconnected as evaluators with stakeholders in an evaluation, we argue that it is impossible to be value-free. We paid careful attention to the power relations among the stakeholders and between ourselves and the stakeholders, because this was needed for ‘good dialogue’ in terms of respect, openness, trust and engagement, for mutual learning and for human flourishing. We feel that it is important that evaluators be explicit about their worldview and how it relates to their evaluation practice. Evaluation starts with evaluators being interconnected (in any way) with the world.

Another point for discussion is the question whether this is still evaluation or rather action research. Action research, just like evaluation, can take multiple forms and can be considered ‘a family of approaches’. Responsive evaluation, in turn, is one approach of many within the field of evaluation. However, there are quite some similarities between the main characteristics of action research approaches and those of responsive evaluation. For example, working for social change with others instead of for others, enhancing dialogue and development in practice, taking a value-oriented stance towards practice, engaging in a living, emergent process, creating knowledge-in-action (based on the concept of knowledge as a social construction): these are features of action research approaches as well as of responsive evaluation. Yet, though action research and responsive evaluation share these important notions, the latter can be distinguished as a specific methodology (instead of a general orientation to inquiry) for evaluating and improving practices. Moreover, action research does not necessarily start with evaluating a practice, whereas in responsive evaluation, evaluators always start by evaluating the practice, together with the stakeholders. Practice improvements in responsive evaluation thus follow from the evaluation, not the other way around. Further, responsive evaluation
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is a systematic approach to involving multiple stakeholders in dialogue, with clearly defined prerequisites to enhance ‘good dialogue’. Therefore, we argue that responsive evaluation can add practical and evaluative value to the basic features of action research approaches.

5. Lessons learned

Like the stakeholders, responsive evaluators are part of the social learning process as well. In carrying out our project, we learned some lessons that we feel may be valuable to others involved in responsive evaluation and the participation of marginalized groups. Responsive evaluation is generally an intensive and time-consuming evaluation methodology. However, we conducted our evaluation in just six months, indicating that it is actually possible in a short period if the choice is made to focus on the process (facilitating dialogical interaction and hermeneutic learning). Thus, we would advise evaluators who have only limited time to conduct a responsive or otherwise participatory evaluation not to focus too much on the content of the issues. These issues can be considered instrumental to the process without having to slow it down by extensive theoretical analysis. The goal of the evaluation can guide evaluators in deciding how far to emphasize either the content of the issues or the process.

Further, responsive evaluators are faced with the task of integrating different perspectives. It is important, therefore, to be careful not to marginalize voices that might initially seem not constructive for the dialogue between and among stakeholders. In our evaluation, we chose to concentrate on the similarities instead of the differences in perspectives throughout the whole evaluation process, taking a strength-based approach. However, we did not ignore deviant perspectives, such as that of a manager who publicly criticized the councils in a less than constructive manner. This perspective was used as a vehicle for dialogue, for example by using some of his explicit criticisms as a starting point for the dialogue in the managers’ focus group. We learned that this approach helped turn differences into vehicles for hermeneutic learning, as stakeholders were confronted with (and thus made aware of) one another’s as well as their own perspectives.

Another lesson relates to the restrictions of embedding ongoing reflexive dialogue in practices. Responsive evaluation should, ideally, foster such dialogue between stakeholders.
After the project, an arrangement was made that the central client council would focus on the organization’s overall policy issues, whereas the local client councils would focus on subjects related to the daily lives of the clients. Further, the central client council became an active and more equal partner for the Board of Directors. However, stakeholders agree that this ongoing process needs continuous attention. Though at central level the central client council and Board of Directors have developed their dialogical interaction further, the communication between local client councils and managers is still a subject of concern for the organization. This raises questions for evaluators about the extent to which social change can be embedded in the practice that is evaluated. Ways to embed social change and the evaluative interactions of stakeholders in practice may differ from setting to setting. We thus encourage evaluators to think together with stakeholders about ways to continue the evaluative interactions that they have started. Practice never is finished; nor is dialogue.

We also learned that the participation of client councils in the care for older people is about a continuous search for the small, yet often powerful, concrete cases that really matter to people. A parallel conclusion can be drawn concerning the inclusion of marginalized groups in evaluation. We, as responsive evaluators, learned that including marginalized groups in evaluation means opening the dialogue to the seemingly minor subjects that are of great significance to these particular, once-silent, stakeholders. The participation of marginalized groups in evaluation? An important mission possible.

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3 In January 2009, Baur was asked by the organization to facilitate an evaluation day for the central client council and the Board of Directors, to responsively evaluate how the new arrangements were working in practice. Both the central client council and the Board of Directors were unanimously positive about the overall trend: the central council had become more active, and the communication and relationship between it and the Board of Directors had improved significantly (e.g., there were more opportunities for bottom-up communication and agenda setting by the central client council).
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References


