

“Your career will be over”—Power and contradictions in the work of educational evaluators



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research was to study professional evaluators' experiences of power relations and contradictory issues in the evaluation processes. Utterances concerning power and contradictions were extracted by close reading of the transcribed interviews of 15 Finnish experienced evaluators. The evaluators described contradictions in the evaluator's role, in the reduced perspective of interest groups and in the cross-draughts of methodical choices. They articulated the tensions caused by personal relations, weak knowledge of criteria, focus of reporting, and the use of evaluation results. Evaluators talked about power as the use of expertise, as interactive relations, as a fight for positions, as a reporting responsibility, and as knowledge management.

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Introduction

Evaluation requires making choices among competing conceptions of the quality of the evaluated target, and in so doing, it privileges some interests over others. Stakeholder participation opens up differing opinions of how the evaluation process should be managed and how the data could be used. Commissioners of evaluation may have varying explicit and implicit motives to initiate evaluation process. Therefore, both conflict resolution and the exercise of power are present in every evaluation making it a political process (Carr, Lhussier, Wilkinson, & Gleadhill, 2008, p. 163). This is definitely true also in the *educational field* which is the context of the research reported in this article.

What Jaffee (2011, p. 200) says about organisational changes also pertains to evaluations: they are inevitably fraught with tensions, contradictions, and unintended consequences. Commissioners, evaluators, stakeholders and targets of evaluations have their own interests concerning the evaluations in which they are involved. Hidden ideological contradictions are powerful, and can be present in what constitutes the evaluation, what constitutes the design for the evaluation in a particular case, or what constitutes the chosen theoretical approach (Amory, 2010, p. 69).

Evaluation has become a business sector of its own which triggers important questions of the evaluator's competence, the

quality of the evaluation processes, and ethical principles. New evaluation agencies try to establish their positions in the field where evaluation targets (schools, educational programs, education providers) try to protect their credibility and even survival (Simola, Rinne, Varjo, & Kauko, 2013). It is easy to agree in principle that evaluation is needed for improvement and development but practical implementations are much more complicated. 'Harmonic ideal' and 'true praxis' do not always meet each other.

The aim of this research is to study professional evaluators' experiences of power relations and contradictory issues in the educational evaluation processes by means of interviews. In the next chapter I will shed theoretical light on the key concepts in order to look carefully at professionals' varying experiences by means of data-driven qualitative analysis in the spirit of abduction (Levin-Rozalis, 2010).

Power and contradictions in the educational evaluation

The relationships between power and contradictions can be bidirectional. Emerged contradictions may be solved by means of power, or exercise of power may cause contradictions. Because educational evaluation deals with people (e.g. teachers, students, educational providers), I see Turner's conceptualisation of 'power through people' as a good starting point in Fig. 1.

Coercion may come first into people's mind when power is mentioned. It is defined as the attempt to control a target against their will and self-interests through the deployment of human and material resources to constrain and manipulate their behaviour.

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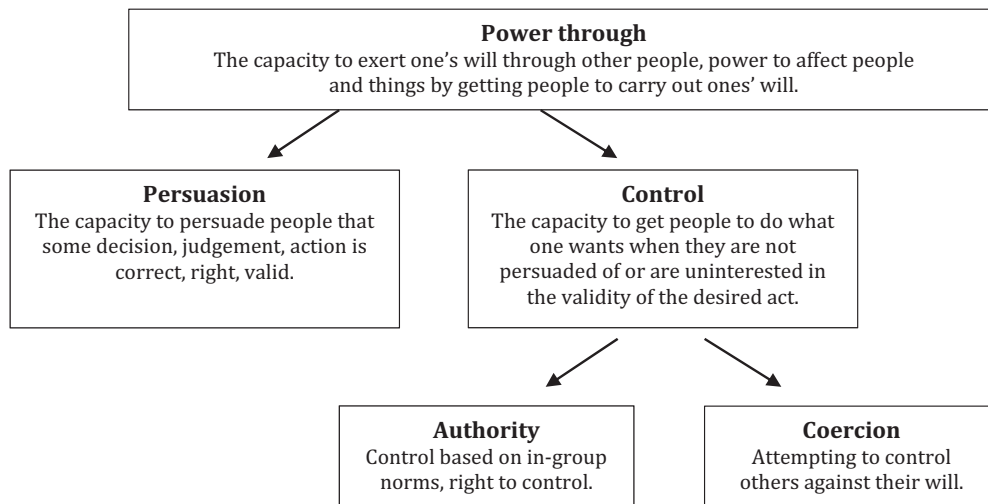


Fig. 1. The nature of power through people (Turner, 2005, p. 7).

This is in line with many external evaluations done by national or local authorities when evaluated persons or organisations are more or less forced to participate in the evaluation. Turner (2005, pp. 10–12) reminds us that coercion is the weakest and least effective process of power which is used when one actually does not have power.

According to Turner, persuasion is the power to get people to believe that certain things are correct, right, moral or appropriate. For example, an evaluator tries to convince the evaluand or the commissioner that based on his/her knowledge on evaluation methods, certain procedure to gather data is the best. Authority is the power to control in-group members because they are persuaded that it is right for a certain person (e.g. evaluator, key stakeholder) to control them in certain matters. Therefore an evaluator needs authority. Persuasion is the process of negotiating and validating reality collectively within one's reference groups (Turner, 2005, pp. 5–12). *Negotiative persuasion and authority* are the key elements of an evaluator's role, especially where developmental or more dialogical (Vedung, 2010, pp. 268–270) evaluations are concerned.

Looking at persuasion and authority more closely, various expressions of power can be found in the evaluation context defined by VeneKlasen and Miller (2002) and Gaventa and Cornwall (2006, p. 100): power over, power to, power with, and power within. 'Power over' refers to the same which was described above in Turner's (2005) concept of coercion. 'Power to' refers to productive conflicts and constructive contradictions, because in order to derive something useful from evaluations it is necessary to exercise power. In the paradigms on participatory (Plottu & Plottu, 2009) and developmental (Patton, 2011) evaluations, the idea of shared evaluation responsibility is the same as the idea of 'power with'.

In Jacobs' (2012, p. 355) terms, 'power as caring relations' is not coercive but has the potential to bring people together for mutual benefit. If a relationship (e.g. commissioner, evaluator, evaluatees, stakeholders) is truly equal, partners may try to use power in negotiations or in situations only when they believe the other partner is, perhaps, trying to question the already made decisions (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005, p. 210.) This is typical in external evaluations but may also happen in evaluations where partners have worked together for a long time (e.g. participatory or developmental evaluation).

Power and interaction cannot be separated and, therefore, all social institutions and relations – evaluation networks included – deal with power aspects. According to Gaventa and Cornwall (2006, p. 123) and Taras (2008), the relational power of power

relations reflects Foucault's view of power as residing not in individuals, but in the positions that they occupy and in the ways in which discourses make these positions available to them. People exercise power and are targets of it at the same time, i.e. schools and teachers have an impact on evaluators and evaluation designs as well. Therefore, power relations do not form a closed structure; rather, they bring into being free subjects, and do so by addressing both parties with productive effects on their identity (Tan, 2009; Thompson, 2013, p. 290).

If exercising 'power through people' is carried out along the line of control and coercion illustrated in Fig. 1, it may result in contradictions, conflicts, and disputes. Rontou (2012, p. 143) defines contradictions as tensions or dilemmas that arise from the processes within and between the elements of the system. One can speak of contradictions between actions when one presumes that their motives contradict each other (e.g. commissioner of evaluation vs. evaluation target group). A contradiction may also refer to the act of saying something that is the opposite of something else or that has a very different meaning. Contradictions may be cognitive, procedural, interpersonal or normative (Isoherranen, Rekola, & Nurminen, 2008, pp. 103–105). Regarding evaluation, these kinds of contradictions may emerge at any phase of the evaluation process, from task definition to result implementation into practice.

Oppositions can be created in relation to other stakeholders' opinions, the evaluators' or evaluation providers' explicit interests or the stated objectives of ongoing evaluation. Values are very important because education is fundamentally value-laden activity and evaluation's basic definition connects it to the word 'value' (e-value-tion). People's different values may be a source for serious disagreements. Values indicate what kind of action is positively or negatively meaningful to different people (Kuusela, 2010, p. 21–24; Pettit, 2006, p. 72) and it has concrete implications to the use of evaluation results.

Concepts of contradictions, disputes and conflicts overlap, but conflict may be seen as the most serious. According to Brad Spangler and Burgess (2012), disputes are short-term disagreements that are relatively easy to resolve. Long-term, deep-rooted problems are conflicts which usually involve non-negotiable issues because they often concern moral or value differences and people do not want to compromise fundamental values. A conflict is a state rather than a process and, as such, can be either latent or manifest. In many evaluation processes, it is difficult to predict what kinds of aspects may lead to disputes or conflicts. Destructive

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