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Lessons learned for the 21st century: the realization of evidence-based practice
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Abstract
“The evidence-wave” as Evert Vedung expresses it travels over the globe. This session reports from its appearance in Swedish social welfare where it has a strong support at the national level which affects local agencies who prepare for something they suppose will support efforts to improve their undertakings, unclear how. Organizations are supposed to implement EBP but they are uncertain participating actors in weak networks. Participant shifts, assignment switches and uncertainty about the networks’ purpose creates difficult conditions for successful implementation. Thus, a weak top-down control and a weak local network organization provide limited opportunities to ensure that evidence-based studies based on outcome evaluations have an impact. Knowledge from the evaluation-society seems not to have affected this process. This session should be highly relevant for the evaluation community as our ability to both design and critically examine dissemination processes of EBP is of vital importance for evaluation practice.

Introduction
Ideas and concepts of how to evaluate are diffused over the globe as the practice of evaluation expands internationally. The stock of concepts for reforming organizations and solving their problems is massive. One idea that has had a huge impact is using evidence as a tool for evaluation and management. Its strengths and weaknesses have been widely debated in recent years. This paper presents a study of the implementation of evidence-based practice (EBP) within social services in Sweden. Experiences from implementation processes at the national and local levels during a ten-year period are discussed.

The evidence wave is affecting the evaluation society at present and will do so in the future. In Sweden the driving forces are the national government and its agencies. The idea of evidence is usually linked to the development of increased performance measurement within the framework of New Public Management. These ideas have been supplemented with ideas from medicine on how to maximize the quality of decision-making. Decisions affecting patients should initially be based on knowledge with scientific support from controlled experiments. Thereafter decisions are to be supplemented by knowledge from professional expertise and consumers/patients. This evidence wave requires a change of routines for professionals as well as the emergence of new actors. The purpose of the implementation of EBP is to provide a practice where quality-assured knowledge is disseminated and utilized, supporting the emergence of fair organizations beneficial to clients and patients. Evidence-based practice is a further development, and a highly debated issue, that challenges and even outcompetes other forms of evaluation methods and has spread to fields such as teaching and correctional treatment in prison (Krogstrup, 2011; Trinder & Reynolds, 2000).

A study of conditions in Sweden is presented and is argued to be of general relevance for the evaluation community. The idea that decisions must be taken based on the best evidence involves a plethora of opportunities and challenges for evaluation because it implies specific evaluative activities (Donaldson, Christie, & Mark, 2009). In Sweden, a series of experiments to implement evidence-based practice in social work began about a decade ago; along with methods to investigate and evaluate clients’ needs, this was launched by national agencies as the proper means to manage
practice. Organizations have been built up in regions and municipalities in order to support evidence-based care and the use of scientific knowledge. A large number of agencies, often in collaboration with organizations and R&D units, are working to develop and implement policies based on scientific evidence. This kind of steering is problematized by governance research that has demonstrated the difficulty of solving wicked problems by control in hierarchical structures and that the application of standardized systems for knowledge management is determined in the local context (Barfoed & Jacobsson, 2012; Greenhalgh, Robert, Macfarlane, Bate, & Kyriakidou, 2004; Hjelte, Brännström, & Engström, 2010).

A national project was initiated in 2003, involving five universities and their surrounding regions and municipalities (the KUBAS projects). Knowledge-based social services and new forms of cooperation between colleges/universities and municipalities were to be organized. One of those projects – Sociorama as it was named at Växjö University - was carried out with great efforts from different players. The reported study is based upon an evaluation of this work ten years after the start (Denvall, Lernå, & Nordesjö, 2014). It is also based upon studies on the national level where annual contracts between the state and the actor SALAR have aimed to stimulate a more systematic development of evidence-based knowledge in public social welfare (Denvall & Johansson, 2012). New forms of cooperation between the national level and municipalities have been organized. SALAR (Association of Local Authorities and Regions) has established support structures for evidence-based practice within 17 regions. SALAR is a significant organization that represents all Swedish municipalities and regions (www.skl.se). Empirical data from those two studies are presented, one at the national level and one at the local level as a case study of Sociorama.

The context of evidence

The evidence-based knowledge steering by the Ministry of Social Affairs (Socialdepartementet, www.government.se) and the Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen, www.socialstyrelsen.se) can best be compared to a guideline model with requirements for compliance with knowledge of the best available interventions (Bergmark, Bergmark, & Lundström, 2011). It represents external and separate control over local decision-makers, in which knowledge is formed outside the local activity in a scientific logic (cf. Hanberger, 2003). Conversely locally crafted contextual information represents an integrated management function where knowledge is formed in collaboration between professionals and experts as in networks.

The interest in science-based monitoring and decision systems has increased as the targeting and delivery systems have become increasingly common in the public sector. Hopes are raised that such systems will provide better decision support, making it possible to compare with other activities to reduce errors and contribute to increased transparency and democracy; they represent a megatrend of today (Vedung, 2010). With increasing persistence, welfare ministries and stakeholders at the regional level in recent years have implemented a number of ingredients to promote this development, such as “Managing for Results”, regional support for structures for evidence-based practice (EBP) and the programme for good elderly care (PGA). Each region is developing these support structures in the social services and parts of the health care system with the goal of creating EBP in social services. The formation of various types of networks is assumed to be essential for success (Kommunförbundet Skåne, 2013). The large number of networks, anchoring groups and various steering groups, however, is also considered to be destructive and cause confusion, especially concerning participants’ mandates (Statskontoret, 2013).

On the other hand, less formalized knowledge systems based on local evaluations and open comparisons are frequent in decision-making at the individual as well as at the organizational level (Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2007; Trinder & Reynolds, 2000). Through process-oriented evaluation approaches and analyses, knowledge is created together with the professionals in order to steer towards desired goals. Locally adapted knowledge is anticipated to better handle the specific contexts in which knowledge is to be applied (Levi, Wallin, & Thor, 2010). This may be as self-
evaluations, innovative models of evaluation, benchmarking or indicators for monitoring. They can be organized into networks of interacting agents in order to create new perspectives on familiar, well-known activities. They can be highly formalized as public associations and R&D units or as loosely connected networks of professionals initiated for mutual contacts.

Networks for implementing guidelines and decisions are framed. This study especially highlights and problematizes the network as a solution for knowledge management problems. In these contexts steering finds “softer” forms: collaboration, partnerships, evaluating and allocating resources in a “polyphony” of actors (Villadsen, 2008). Johansson et al. (2011) speak, for example, about “collaborative governance”, where the government and relevant organizations increasingly include partnerships and mutual agreements in order to influence social processes by modifying cognitive structures. Normative explanations travel across administrations and policies and encounter local stakeholders who are organized in networks. Networks represent a suitable strategy for efficiency reasons and a means to allocate resources held by other actors (Barbeira, Franco, & Haase, 2012), perhaps even to handle the demands of central government control. In a governance perspective, organizing networks with multi-actor engagement across organizations represent means of implementation and innovation (Hartley, Sørensen, & Torfing, 2013).

Interpretation of the data is dependent on the instruments that are present in the local context (Hertting & Vedung, 2009). The development of governance has caused policy makers to organize in horizontal network-like forms where many actors are represented (Andersson, 2011; Sundström & Pierre, 2009). In this context, knowledge rather takes on a promotional and learning role for the members of these networks, although it may also try to control the external governing party, such as the implementation of national guidelines. According to Barbeira and colleagues, knowledge sharing in networks is a valuable resource for any type of organization (Barbeira et al., 2012).

Meta-governance as a concept relates to the control of self-organization and the prescriptive regulation of autonomous networks (Haveri, Nyholm, Röiseland, & Vabo, 2009). According to Sørensen and Torfing, this may involve framing of policies in existing networks, for example by influencing the allocation of resources and by intentionally designing the network (Sørensen & Torfing, 2007).

Today’s demands for increased transparency and the use of evidence have several coherent incentives. Research particularly points at the trend towards increased performance measurement and New Public Management, with an extensive impact on several policy areas (V. Johansson & Lindgren, 2013; Power, 1999). Summarized as “the audit society”, these trend-forming elements now represent the standard concept of public administration as indicators, user surveys or health barometers (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004). Internationally, “performance measurement” is followed by a considerable amount of articles and research as well as methodological literature with suggestions as to how the measurements should be carried out and how appropriate decision support is provided (Hunter & Nielsen, 2013; Mayne, 2007).

The Swedish case
The empirical work at the national level has been carried out by Kerstin Johansson Ph.D. through analyses of documents, interviews with central actors and participation in numerous conferences, workshops and everyday meetings during 2010–2013. Analyses have been published several times (Denvall & Johansson, 2012; K. Johansson, 2013; K. Johansson, Vedung, & Denvall, Forthcoming). At the local level as an evaluation of Sociorama ten years after the start. The empirical work consisted of interviews individually and in groups and a survey, with a total of 61 people responding (Denvall et al., 2014).
National level
Representatives of central and local government have signed a number of agreements since 2010 – platform agreements – to strengthen the social services’ ability to use the best available knowledge, and a number of projects to develop forms for audit are in progress. Platform leaders have been hired and several projects have started in the regions concerned.

Relations between the state and providers are changing together with the emergence of new actors, methods and demands when the local social service is supposed to implement and adapt novel decision systems (Denvall & Johansson, 2012). Since the start 2003 all R&D activities have been transformed and re-organized several times within regions, municipalities and the university. These are new and strongly influence the prerequisites for the education and how the research is conducted.

Evaluation and progress reports published by local KUBAS projects arrived at similar results: Success in establishing local partnerships with high activity, particularly on the research side, was noticed. Problems with diverse cultures, collaboration that did not affect the actual client work and to keep the work going when the external funding from the National Board ran out. In the national report SOU 2008 it was proposed that the government and SALAR make agreements on shared objectives and long-term strategies to support the development of EBP in social services. This we can see today in the form of regional support structures and the changing context of the R&D activities.

In summary the research has shown severe difficulties in the implementation of EBP. The content is unclear and is expected to be supplemented by negotiations locally that should be clarified and processed in the future. Agencies involved are under constant de-organization, shaping ambiguous surroundings with fragile networks. Those are the non-ideal yet everyday conditions. Still, EBP has strong support at the national level, which affects local agencies who are preparing for something they suppose will support efforts to improve their undertakings, although it is unclear how.

Local level
The Sociorama project sought greater integration between research, practice and education, and lasted from 2003 to 2009, most active from 2003 to 2005. It was conducted with funding from the National Board of Health and Welfare and took place at five sites in Sweden. One component was combined services in the form of split appointments between a university and a municipality. The forerunners were the sort of combination services that exist in health care as clinical research. The network’s strengths (flexibility, openness, meeting on equal terms) and potential problems (outside the parliamentary control chain, limited transparency, involvement of minor interests) were studied to further understand the network’s design to encompass knowledge management challenges.

The study showed that although several informants described positive experiences of Sociorama, few of the tested ideas had survived. The results show that regular contacts between the university and municipalities were favoured by many. It was important to build relationships and get to know each other’s situation and find ways to collaborate in several areas. Sociorama, as well as R&D and other forms of recurrent municipality days etc., have served as a contact over time but have not been constant. Especially those who themselves worked in combination services as a group emphasized personal gains such as improved collaboration, knowledge and their own careers. A vision still exists that activities could contribute to knowledge for large groups of staff, new interfaces between university and community, and mutual participation in each other’s activities.

To summarize: some of the activities were described as positive since they could link the activities and research. However constant reorganizations changed the landscape for actors. It could be entirely new organizations, a transformation of old ones, mergers of organizations with new missions or new participants with new ideas of how to understand evidence-based practice. Personal and organizational constellations shifted significantly.
Analyses
Collaboration is often gladly mentioned as an appropriate solution to diverse problems. Parties are unable to resolve cross-border issues on their own and are forced to cooperate with other organizations in network-like forms. KUBA’s projects and agreements between the state and SALAR are such examples. They have called for new structures to be implemented, and the network seems to be a frequently-tested solution. The support structures that occur at the regional level can be seen as a form of organization that is controlled via the network. It emphasizes the necessity of horizontal and flexible coordination between established organizations. The new forms of governance, however, question the democratic nature as networks are more informal, flat and changing in order to promote efficiency and flexibility (Hertting & Vedung, 2009; Sørensen & Torfing, 2007). Research has questioned procedures of inclusion and decision-making in an organization where actors ideally are at the same hierarchical level (H. Johansson et al., 2011). These forms of governance imply that the traditional explicit evaluation in the form of objectives and performance becomes more diffuse. Instead, audit takes place in a decentralized governance as soft regulation (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008) and is regulated through voluntary targets and guidelines to relate to (Featherstone & Radaelli, 2003; Mörth, 2004). Four challenges stand out:

1 Substantial and horizontal complexity.
Networks are created to deal with many kinds of problem that are beyond the control of a single organization. If the problem is substantial complexity, additional knowledge is required of participants to be able to handle it. Through the network, multiple perspectives, skills and resources to address the problem might lead to new solutions. In the case of horizontal complexity, the problem exists across organizations, policies and involves several actors simultaneously. The issues that the evidence concerns and the way social problems can be explained and solved are common challenges for the organizations within social welfare. R&D organizations and university research departments ought to be able to reduce this kind of complexity in the long term.

2 Mutual dependency and self-organized collaboration.
Today’s social policy challenges go right across the policy spectrum, and therefore actors are mutually dependent on each other to be able to act effectively. This brings natural incentives for coordination because no actor can act independently without cooperating. Departments of Social Work are also dependent on a number of actors in the environment for their survival. Such interactions may be an expression of trust and good relations, but on the other hand vulnerability, dependence and short-sightedness. The uncertainty that follows can be managed by seeking stable, long-term and well-organized structures. They can consist of clear collaboration on research, training and development (such as support structures for evidence-based practice) and require that resources are applied when contracts are to be clarified.

3 Open, flat and informal coordination.
Networks mean that actors despite differing objectives function as coordinated, open, flat and informal organizations. They are open since entrance and exit are based upon the value of each actor’s contribution, and participation ceases when the need no longer exists. They are flat and informal, as no hierarchy or formal leadership is required. Participants are united in the network, with great freedom – at least in theory. The informal structure might highlight certain staff – the absence of fixed structures and role features allows networks to revolve around those who participate, even if they formally represent other organizations. However, this great flexibility can be perceived as a problem in a network. This is counteracted if the networks organize a stable setting with long-term contracts. These two sides of a network need to be highlighted and brought to life.

4 Policies for external network control.
Governmental organizations have an important role in the coordination of networks around evidence-based practice. It takes active management through the creation of networks to influence the conditions for horizontal collaboration by enabling players and create venues for meetings.
National government can also function as a mediator and facilitator or as a financier. Through various means of control, the external pusher then influences networks, causing an almost self-disciplining effect. It is evident how strongly the state, through agreements with SALAR and projects such as Sociorama, laid the foundation for many of the structures that have characterized interaction in the regions of social welfare.

Conclusions
These studies identify several difficulties in implementing evidence-based practice. According to the programme theory of EBP, it should be based on knowledge from outcome evaluations of interventions, from professional experience and from the views of service users and patients. A rising stream of high-quality evaluation studies is supposed to create better opportunities for authorities to produce meta-analyses and thereby provide sound recommendations and guidelines. One problem this study has revealed is the difficulties in introducing a top-down implementation in public welfare organizations. It seems to be partly due to a lack of good and clear recommendations, but also a lack of legitimacy and uncertainty among users about the relevance of the guidelines. Governance research has demonstrated shortcomings of central authorities when attempting implementation and their dependency on information and sermon. This study has shown that the implementation is counteracted by changing and insecure networks. The local organizations are supposed to implement EBP but they are uncertain participating actors in weak networks. Participant shifts, assignment switches and uncertainty about the networks’ purpose, their contribution to EBP, and how to define their tasks and participants, all combine to create difficult conditions for successful implementation. Thus, a weak top-down control and a weak local network organization provide limited opportunities to ensure that evidence-based studies based on outcome evaluations have an impact.

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References


