

Critical reflection on the evaluation plan of the VARPUNEN project

Minna Kivipelto

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ABSTRACT

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In this article I will provide critical reflection on the evaluation plan and the planning process in the VARPUNEN project (Early Support and Intervention Project) which is carried out in the region of South Ostrobothnia, Finland. I will reflect on to what extent the plan is in line with its theoretical background, empowering evaluation; if the planned evaluation forms and methods enable empowerment and equality between the different participants; how the needs assessment was made and how the goal and objectives of the evaluation were set; and how the plan takes the judgment and dissemination of the evaluation findings into account.

Regional needs assessments were completed by the project personnel only. Evaluation goal and objectives were defined by the project personnel. The plan itself does not demand the empowering of different groups. Feeding back the findings to the service users was not a key element in the plan. As a result, evaluation would intimidate service users, put them into a relatively passive and powerless situation and disempower them. The evaluation plan will mainly support "status quo", i.e. the existing knowledge and power structures.

Critical evaluation planning should enable changes towards equality and challenge oppression. It requires further planning and co-operation with evaluators, researchers and all the stakeholders. It requires someone who

is familiar with critical project evaluation requirements, approaches and feasible methods and, especially, who is conscious of the role of evaluation in society as an information producer.

In this article, I will provide critical reflection on the evaluation plan and the planning process in the VARPUNEN project (Early Support and Intervention Project)¹. The VARPUNEN project is carried out in the region of South Ostrobothnia, Finland. In this article, I will reflect on (1) to what extent the plan is in line with its theoretical background, empowering evaluation; (2) if the planned evaluation forms and methods enable the empowerment of the different participants and equality between them; (3) how the needs assessment was made and how the goal and objectives of the evaluation were set; and (4) how the plan takes the judgement and dissemination of the evaluation findings into account. I will reflect critically on the evaluation plan and on the way it was made, using mainly ideas of empowering evaluation as presented by Adams (2003). Consequently, my task is not to evaluate the project itself, nor its processes or outcomes.

The VARPUNEN project will be carried out between 2004 and 2005. The project is managed by the City of Alavus (VARPUNEN-projekti 2003-2005). The municipalities that take part in the project are Alavus, Kuortane, Töysä, Lehtimäki and Ähtäri, and these municipalities also fund the project together with the State. These quite small municipalities (of 2 133 to 9 922

inhabitants) are situated in South Ostrobothnia (Regional Council of South Ostrobothnia 2005).

There are three persons working in project management. In February 2004, the Project Manager contacted the Centre of Expertise on Social Welfare in the Regions of Ostrobothnia, SONet BOTNIA, concerning the project evaluation. The project needed a person who could plan and possibly also carry out the evaluation. In a meeting concerning project evaluation held at SONet BOTNIA on 18 February 2004, we decided that the project personnel and I, would be responsible for creation of the evaluation plan. The evaluation plan of the VARPUNEN project was made by the project personnel in co-operation with me (Kivipelto 2004). Later on, I asked the Project Manager the permission to also reflect critically on the evaluation plan.

CRITICAL REFLECTION AS A METHOD FOR CRITICAL EVALUATION

There are several ways to classify an evaluation. It can be done based on the form (e.g. summative - formative) or the purpose (e.g. evaluation for accountability - evaluation for development - evaluation for knowledge) of the evaluation (Newburn 2001, 7-9). Classifications can also be based on epistemological, ontological and methodological frameworks, as Kazi (1999, 2000) and Shaw (1999) have done. They are among those theorists who regard critical evaluation as a stance among other kinds of evaluations. In his later work, Kazi (2000, 762-763) uses the term "interpretivist approaches", which include critical theory (e.g. Everitt & Hardiker 1996); feminist evaluation (e.g. Humphries 1999); and social constructionism (e.g. Parton & O'Byrne 2000). The others are evidence-based practice and reflective inquiry (Shaw 1999, 16) or empirical practice, pragmatism and scientific realism (Kazi 1999, 59) or, as he later puts it, empirical practice, pragmatism or methodological pluralism and the post-positivist approach (Kazi 2000, 756-757). It is important to distinguish critical evaluation from other approaches, such as constructivist evaluation, because critical evaluation and constructivist evaluation have different theoretical backgrounds (Everitt & Hardiker 1996, 98) and

different epistemological and ontological frameworks (Kazi 2000, 762-763). However, social constructivism includes "subtle realism" and concepts from critical theories (e.g. Parton & O'Byrne 2000) and this is why these kinds of theories might be applicable in critical evaluation.

The present article represents critical evaluation (Everitt & Hardiker 1996). I understand critical evaluation to be a hyperonym to critically-oriented evaluation approaches, such as empowering evaluation (Adams 2003) empowerment evaluation (Dullea & Mullender 1999)², emancipatory qualitative evaluation (Whitmore 2001), transformative participatory evaluation (Brisolara 1998; Cousins & Whitmore 1998), feminist evaluation (Humphries 1999) and evaluation directed by social constructivism (Parton & O'Byrne 2000). These types of evaluation are directed by theories of critical social science.³ Theories of critical social science concern democracy and social justice. Critical theories reveal how dimensions of oppression generate and maintain certain practices and understandings. Social welfare projects, programmes and practices, and people's understandings and evaluations of them, are located historically and in their social, political and economic contexts. In Finland, critical evaluation is not very common, but there are some examples of it, too (e.g. Metteri (ed.) 2003).

In the present article I use critical reflection as a method for critical evaluation (Gardner 2003). By critical reflection, I mean a process in which a person can be an acting person and the critical reflector of the action. Therefore, I can reflect critically on the VARPUNEN project plan, even though I was the one who completed the project plan in co-operation with the project personnel. Critical reflection is connected to the concept of critical self-reflection. The form of inquiry in critical self-reflection is appraisive rather than prescriptive or designative. Critical reflection involves criticism of assumptions about certain content or a process of problem solving. (Mezirow 1991, 87, 105.) Content reflection is thinking of the actual thing or experiences themselves. Process reflection is thinking of how to handle the experience. (Fisher 2003, 314.) Here the content is the evaluation plan while the process is the way in which the plan was made.

In critical reflection, I am using mainly the

empowering evaluation approach, represented by Adams (2003). According to Adams (2003, 8), empowerment can be defined as "the means by which individuals, groups and/or communities become able to take control of their circumstances and achieve their own goals, thereby being able to work towards helping themselves and others to maximise the quality of their lives". Firstly, empowering evaluation should involve all the participants in managing and carrying it out by themselves, as self-managed research. I understand this means that the evaluation plan should also have been made together with all the participants. Secondly, evaluation should empower equally the practitioners and service users; therefore, the evaluation plan should have been enabled this, too. Thirdly, it is geared to understanding the process of the activity rather than simply drawing conclusions after it has finished. Fourthly, empowering evaluation should have provided a theoretical background for the evaluation, guide decision-making in evaluation and give advice as how to make judgements and disseminate evaluation findings. Therefore, in this study, my purpose is not only to report action but also to highlight themes that need to be changed according to empowering evaluation. (Adams 2003, 137-142.) I hope that the critical reflection on the evaluation plan can give the project evaluator and project personnel tools to further develop the project plan and its contents according to these views.

EVALUATION PLAN OF THE VARPUNEN PROJECT: THE BEGINNING

Needs assessments and goal definitions are part of project planning. They too formed the basis of the evaluation planning of the VARPUNEN project. Also in literature, evaluation planning is discussed simultaneously with project plans or is included in them (e.g. Patton 2002, 164). In the VARPUNEN project, the personnel completed regional interview-based needs assessments between 2003 and 2004⁴. Also regional statistics and reports as well as national programmes designed to develop social welfare services were studied (e.g. Regional Council of South Ostrobothnia 2005; National Development Project for Social Services in Finland 2004; Palvelualojen kehittämisohjelma 2002-2006;

Kuusiokuntien hanke - 2003). In the needs analysis, we examined questions such as who needed the program, how great the need was and how we could meet the need (see also Robson 2000, 127-135).

Instead of using lay knowledge, professional knowledge (e.g. interviewing authorities, gathering information from statistics, reports and national programmes) is a more commonly exploited source of needs analysis (see e.g. Robson 2000, 128-132). This was the case in the needs assessment for the VARPUNEN project. The needs assessment in question did not involve other participants than project personnel and local authorities who would take part in the project. This kind of process is also a message to people that only professional knowledge is worth gathering and using in developing social services.

The goal and objectives of the project developed through these needs assessments. When we started planning the evaluation, the goal and objectives of the project were still under construction, as well as the activities to be pursued. Therefore, we started planning the evaluation by considering the needs assessment of the project, its goal, objectives and activities. In empowering evaluation, goals and objectives should be determined and placed together with the participants (Adams 2003), but project personnel and local authorities carried out this phase. Service users or people living in the region have had quite a little to say about the goal, objectives or activities of the project. Because lay knowledge was not valued, possible alternative ways of defining project goal and objectives were not getting through.

While devising the evaluation plan, the project personnel decided to formulate the goal of the VARPUNEN project in the following way: "The VARPUNEN project aims to promote the well-being of children and youth in the municipalities involved by developing early support and intervention practices, methods and resources in preventive child welfare work" (Kivipelto 2004). After this, they explicated the project objectives: (1) to find new ways to do preventive child welfare work and to build models to do preventive child welfare work with people who work in this sector; (2) to develop and build new working models for day care which are aimed at children with special care and education needs; (3) to

find good practices to provide early support and intervention in preventive child welfare work; (4) to build models for doing preventive child welfare work as work couples; and (5) to influence political decision-making concerning the well-being of the children and the youth.

One could ask how "preventive child welfare work", "new working models" or "good practices" were defined. Preventive child welfare work was defined as work done by certain professionals. It directed the evaluation to examine activities accomplished only by social and health care professionals. The ways of reaching the goal and the objectives were quite authority-centred, too: face-to-face support in workplaces, as well as arranging local and national seminars about early support and intervention in child welfare work (VARPUNEN-projekti 2003-2005). Regional training seminars were planned and arranged by the project personnel. The seminars were open only to public authorities working with children and youth. National seminars were conducted by STAKES (the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health). In both kinds of training, the main theme was to find and develop early support and intervention methods in child welfare work. Other, such as hidden or unnoticeable preventive actions were not considered worthy of consideration.

THEORETICAL GUIDELINES OF THE EVALUATION PLAN

I was responsible for the theoretical guidelines for the project plan. In evaluation, theory is used to justify and inform practice (House & Howe 1999, x). I discussed the evaluation plan with the project personnel, but the ultimate responsibility relied heavily on my experience in project planning. The project personnel highlighted some principles, which I was to keep in mind while making the evaluation plan. In the theoretical guidelines of the VARPUNEN project, it was stressed that evaluation should be transparent and interactive. Evaluation should also provide formative and summative information. It seemed to me that the evaluation plan would fulfil some, though not all, of these theoretical requirements during the project evaluation.

Firstly, the financiers and project personnel were interested in how the project would reach its goals and objectives, to what extent this

would happen and what the outcome would be. We thought that this might require summative information. Summative studies allow making judgements and generalizations about effective types of interventions and the conditions under which those efforts are effective. (Patton 2002, 218, 224.) We chose to use semi-structured questionnaires, because they offer quite an easy way to collect a lot of information. However, some service users might not be familiar with questionnaires. Also, functional illiteracy and cultural norms may impede the use of questionnaires. Furthermore, questionnaires accept only certain knowledge produced by certain abilities. (Gillham 2000, 12-13.) We decided to offer clients additional help with questionnaires, if needed, but did not allow people to produce information by their own means. By this, the power positions between service users and authorities were going to be strengthened.

Secondly, the project personnel thought that an evaluation should provide information for project improvement (see also Mulroy & Lauber 2004, 574). The idea of "improvement" in this case was not very clear, but I did not notice it while planning the evaluation. Instead of analysing this kind of concepts, I concentrated on different evaluation forms and models. I noticed that formative evaluations served the purpose of improving the project (Patton 2002, 220). Robson (2000, 50) says that the purpose of formative evaluation is to shape the program and to help achieve its goals. We chose the focus group technique, because it can benefit evaluators, programme staff, policymakers and administrators by providing an in-depth understanding of programme effectiveness from the perspective of participants as stakeholders in programme outcomes (Ansay, Perkins & Nelson 2004). The idea is that people themselves are an important source of knowledge and interviewing a group is more fruitful than interviewing a single person. The advantage of this technique is that it allows digging into the issue until the group has reached consensus. (Finch & Lewis 2003; Krueger & Casey 2000.) That is a way to try to find solutions for developing the project activities. Regarding focus groups, Chen (2005, 139) says that the method does not yield generalizable numbers, such as exact percentages of people holding a particular belief or encountering a particular experience. The problem might also be

how to articulate clearly and utilize all the collected information and findings. In the evaluation plan of the VARPUNEN project, the project coordinators and the researcher, not the service users, decided on how to gather and analyze information. This is neither very critical (Carr & Kemmis 1986, 155-162) nor empowering (Adams 2003).

Thirdly, the project personnel stated that the evaluation should be transparent and interactive. This meant for us that participation should be involved in all of the evaluation phases: evaluation planning, implementation, development of action plans, and dissemination (see e.g. Gilliam et al. 2002). I found that these purposes were close to empowering evaluation. In empowering evaluation, all the clients who would benefit from the project should also take part in the evaluation and the evaluation should make possible equality between the different participants (Adams 2003, 137, 139-140). But according to empowering evaluation, the major stakeholders or the entire group should also be responsible for conducting the evaluation. The evaluator's role should be that of a "critical friend". The evaluator can question shared biases or "group thinking". But I did not fully see these connections between transparency and interactiveness. My "common sense" idea was that a minimal requirement was that the information from all the phases had to be passed to all the client groups. I thought that if careful documentation took place in all phases, it would allow the evaluation to be transparent. This means that it should be feasible to give information about the evaluation of the project to all the participants and other interest groups in different situations (in regional and national training seminars, scientific seminars, articles, etc.). The planning phase was rather transparent and interactive to all the project personnel, but the evaluation questions could have been formulated in co-operation between service users and the project personnel (see Whitmore 2001). According to empowerment evaluation, transparency and interactiveness are not one-way processes, where professionals give information to other partners after the evaluation has been carried out. In empowerment evaluation, people should be engaged in collective dialogue, where information is produced and analyzed together with all the participants, avoiding oppressive and unequal structures and positions (Adams 2003).

PLAN FOR IMPLEMENTING THE EVALUATION

After explicating the goal and the objectives of the VARPUNEN project, we formulated the evaluation questions with the project personnel. After this, we concluded that the evaluation should provide answers to the following questions:

(1) What new ways of doing preventive child welfare work and what models for doing preventive child welfare work with people working in this sector have been created during the project? (2) How have the working models developed and what working models have been created for day care aimed at children needing special care and education? (3) What good practices have been created to provide early support and intervention in preventive child welfare work? (4) What new models have been created to do preventive child welfare work as work couples? (5) How has the project influenced political decision-making concerning the well-being of children and youth?

According to the plan, the project evaluation would consist of three rounds (table 1).

During the initial evaluation round, the information would be collected first by questionnaires. The information collected should then be analyzed with the SPSS statistics software by a researcher. After this, the project personnel would arrange evaluation meetings where the summarized and analyzed information would be discussed. They would first discuss the items the respondents were not satisfied with, and also how to develop these activities, as well as how to strengthen them. The discussion concerning these conclusions would continue in focus group discussions between different authorities (Ansary, Perkins & Nelson 2004; Krueger & Casey 2000). Information produced in the focus groups would be discussed among the project personnel, and after that the project would be developed according to the information.

There will be two more rounds after the initial evaluation round. It is obvious that careful documentation should be done in every phase. Information will be collected for the final report, where the outcomes of the project will be compared against its goal, objectives, theoretical guidelines and methods. I thought it was important to recognise the activities that made it possible to reach the goal, objectives and activities, as well as those that did not. I have set so strict limitations to

Table 1. Evaluation rounds and implementation time schedule in the VARPUNEN project.

EVALUATION ROUND	IMPLEMENTATION DATES
1st Round	
Specifying the goal and objectives (project personnel and evaluator)	March- April 2004
Preparing the inquiry and questionnaires (project personnel and evaluator)	March- April 2004
Sharing the questionnaires with the public authority, service users and workers participating in the local and national training (project personnel)	April-May 2004
Summary of the inquiry (evaluator)	June 2004
Evaluation meeting. Based on the results of the inquiries, the activities are estimated and a decision will be made on which activities are continued and which ones need further development (project personnel)	June 2004
Summary of what was decided in the evaluation meeting (project personnel)	June 2004
Preparing the focus group interviews (project personnel, possibly an outside evaluator)	August 2004
Focus group interviews (project personnel)	September-October 2004
Summary of the focus group interviews(project personnel)	October 2004
Evaluation meeting. On the basis of the results from the focus group, it is estimated what activities are continued and what activities need further development (project personnel)	October-November 2004
Summary of what was decided in the evaluation meeting (project personnel)	November 2004
2nd Round	
Preparing the inquiry and questionnaires (project personnel and evaluator)	December 2004
Sharing the questionnaires with the public authority, service users and workers participating in the local and national training (project personnel)	January 2005
Summary of the inquiry (evaluator)	January-February2005
Evaluation meeting. On the basis of the inquiry results, it is estimated what activities are continued and what activities need further development (project personnel)	February 2005
Summary of what was decided in the evaluation meeting (project personnel)	February-March 2005
Preparing the focus group interviews (project personnel, possibly an outsider evaluator)	March 2005
Focus group interviews (project personnel)	April 2005
Summary of the focus group interviews (project personnel)	April-May 2005
Evaluation meeting. On the basis of the results from the focus group, it is estimated what activities are continued and what activities need further development (project personnel)	May 2005
Summary of what decided in the evaluation meeting (project personnel)	June 2005
3rd Round	
Preparing the final inquiry and questionnaires (project personnel and evaluator)	June 2005
Sharing questionnaires with the public authority, service users and workers participating in the local and national training (project personnel)	August 2005
Summary of the inquiry (evaluator)	October 2005
Writing the evaluation report (evaluator)	October-December 2005
Seminar where the evaluation is made public (all project participants and interest groups)	December 2005

acceptable information so it will be questionable whether unanticipated outcomes and effects will be recognised in case the outcome of the study is not a happy ending (Adams 2003, 152).

According to the plan, the evaluation process will be cyclic. Different information gathering and analyzing rounds will be included in the process. It should be possible to combine research and action (see also Carr & Kemmis 1986, 184-187). By following the evaluation plan, it should be possible to use the collected information to develop or strengthen the project activities. But the disadvantage was that the service users were not invited to this planning phase, stressed by Adams (2003, 137) and other critical evaluators (e.g. Dullea & Mullender 1999, 83; Everitt & Hardiker 1996, 34). Therefore, the contribution of the service users to the carrying out of the study will also be rather minimal.

An important aspect in evaluation is to make judgements of the findings and to disseminate them. But, what is "judgement" or "dissemination"? If evaluation should provide concrete recommendations for employees, public authorities and municipal decision-making (e.g. concerning working methods, training, professional expertise or resources in preventive child welfare work) we probably could be very content with the evaluation plan of the VARPUNEN project. Or, if it is important to plan and decide how information about the evaluation will be disseminated to a broader audience (Owen & Rogers 1999, 18, 70), the evaluation plan of the VARPUNEN project should make this possible. According to the plan, there will be at least one local seminar directed to the project participants and interest groups that represent public authorities. Also other professional and scientific publications, local, national and international conferences, seminars and workshops will be appropriate arenas for disseminating the findings and conclusions arising from the evaluation. At the moment, three students are also preparing their polytechnic diploma works on the VARPUNEN project. Feeding back the findings to the service users (Adams 2003, 152, 155) were not a key element in the plan. In evaluation planning, I had created a typical situation where evaluation would intimidate service users, put them into a relatively passive and powerless situation and, thus, also disempower them (Adams 2003, 141).

TOWARDS MORE CRITICAL EVALUATION PLANNING?

The beginning. Planning a critical project evaluation requires someone who is familiar with critical project evaluation requirements, approaches and feasible methods and, especially, who is conscious about the role of evaluation in society as an information producer. It should be understood how all produced information is partial and supporting or challenging certain knowledge and power structures. In the VARPUNEN project, the evaluation will mainly support "status quo", i.e. the existing knowledge and power structures. While planning the evaluation, I did not have enough knowledge about critical evaluation; so, I could not help the project personnel in this respect. We arranged a series of meetings and discussions to define the goal, objectives, activities and evaluation requirements of the project but did not discuss what kind of information the evaluation would produce or who would benefit from the information.

In the evaluation plan of the VARPUNEN project, the project personnel completed regional needs assessments. When planning critical evaluation, all those whose services will be evaluated should also be invited to the planning process from its earliest stage. Information should be collected from service users and people living in the region, not only from professionals and official statistics. When planning the evaluation of the VARPUNEN project, this could have been done by inviting representatives of service users and people living in the region to a planning forum.

In the VARPUNEN project plan, the project personnel defined the evaluation goal and objectives. The goal and objectives were quite conventional and tending to provide rather typical and conformist results. We did not question what kind of attitudes, assumptions and values the goal and objectives represented. Critical discussion concerning the goal and objectives would have exposed hidden attitudes, assumptions and values behind the goal and objectives. The representation of clients and people living in the region would have allowed finding alternative ways of defining the goal and objectives through in evaluation planning.

Theoretical guidelines. I think we can speak

in some cases about the empowerment of the project personnel. Only they could have felt that they were able to participate in all the phases of evaluation planning and they probably also learned how to make an evaluation or ask suitable persons to carry out certain evaluation tasks. This means that the role of an outsider evaluator will diminish while the evaluation goes on. However, our expectations were quite conventional in regard to the planning requirements and to the participation of different persons that needed to be allocated to the evaluation plan. The plan itself does not demand the empowering of different groups. One reason is that we did not have time to discuss this theoretical concept at all.

I still see the empowering aspect as very important in project evaluation, what comes to the service users in the project. According to Adams (2003, 144-145), the success of empowerment can be seen in many ways, e.g. whether the participants' self-esteem has increased or their personal relationships have improved. Owning service evaluation is a key part of empowerment because it means that those who fund and manage services will be required to listen to the voice of those who have been traditionally silenced (Dullea & Mullender 1999, 96). Evaluation should also enable changes towards equality and challenge oppression (Everitt & Hardiker 1996, 158). Therefore, empowering is by no means an easy task in evaluation (Chen 2005, 151). It requires further planning and co-operation with evaluators and researchers as well as involvement by all the stakeholders.

Evaluation forms and methods. The evaluation plan of the VARPUNEN project includes ideas and principles of process evaluation and formative evaluation models, as well as summative evaluation. We had created a process evaluation model consisting of three evaluation rounds. During each round, questionnaires will produce summative information and the focus group technique will make formative evaluation possible. Questionnaires were formulated with the project personnel - not with all the representatives of all those services that are evaluated. Both questionnaires and the focus group technique should be completed with a dialogical process between professionals (project personnel, evaluator, social and health care professionals) and lay participants (service users

and people living in the region). It should be seen that people are capable of gathering data, analyzing them, and using them to the action based on the research findings (Dullea & Mullender 1999, 84).

Also unanticipated effects and outcomes would be recognised in planning evaluation forms and methods. This can be promoted by giving people an opportunity to produce, collect, and analyze information by their own means. Critical inquiry should be an open process, in which the participants reflect on data and make their analyses and interpretations of those data in light of substantive questions about the project (Rossman & Rallis 2000, 61). Power and its realization in practices prohibiting or promoting participation should be understood (Gregory 2000). Evaluation processes and products should be planned in such a way that they transform power relations and promote social action and change. There are some good examples of this kind of evaluation (e.g. Bagamoyo College of Arts et al. 2002; Whitmore 2001).

In Finland, customers or users of services have initiated only 12 per cent of the evaluations carried out (Ahonen, Virtanen & Uusikylä 2002, 52). It should also be noted that users' views on service provision and social work practice should never be used as a sole criterion of evaluation. Subjective views need to be understood for their meaning and the ways in which they are shaped and given expression in our society. (Everitt, Hardiker, Littlewood & Mullender 1992, 73.) It should also be noted that participation and empowerment are not always experienced only in a positive way. Karen Healy (2001, 100) has found that the participation of oppressed people is not necessarily experienced as empowering. We did not consider these initial and critical political aspects when planning the evaluation of the VARPUNEN project, but I hope they will be raised and examined more in depth during the upcoming evaluation process.

Judgement and dissemination of evaluation findings. The evaluation plan of VARPUNEN allows making recommendations for the employees, public authorities and municipal decision-making. But it should be seen that if during the dissemination of the evaluation findings lay knowledge is not taken into account, the evaluation easily accepts the world as it is (see Weiss 2004, 157-158). By this, I understand

that changes will not really improve the position and circumstances of those people who are never or seldom listened to, e.g. the service users. Feeding back evaluation findings to the service users could have been planned to happen by using methods where research and action are combined, e.g. through participatory action research (Gray 2004, 373-393). Empowering evaluation can give advice as how to make judgements and disseminate evaluation findings (Adams 2003).

Evaluation should not only influence the individual but also the structural (e.g. institutional) level (Everitt & Hardiker 1996, 98-104). According to the objectives of the VARPUNEN project, political decision-making concerning the well-being of children and youth should be influenced. This can mean that the agency structures, official diagnoses of social problems among children and their families that need special care and education will be changed by the VARPUNEN project. But did the plan support their change towards a more equal and anti-oppressive direction? Dalrymple and Burke's (1997) book considers the ways in which this can be done by using the law as an instrument of empowerment and change. Their opinion is that empowerment can make structural and institutional changes possible.

It should also be noticed that no evaluation is value-free. The evaluation plan of the VARPUNEN project will allow changes in practices, peoples' situations and circumstances mainly according to the values and views of social and health care professionals. Dissemination is about sharing knowledge and using information as part of a change process. Evaluation findings should be fed into a process by which current policy and practice are critically reflected upon. (Frost 2002, 53.) These kinds of value commitments should be explicated and examined if evaluation is to be morally and politically self-reflective (House & Howe 1999, 5).

The ethical and political dimensions of evaluation should be stressed more in evaluation planning because evaluation has a political stance (Frost 2002, 47; Mulroy & Lauber 2004, 573; Weiss 2004, 157-158). Evaluation sends a message to people that the project is worth their time and attention. Evaluation can influence the opinion around a programme and possibly set off a cascade of future events. (Weiss 2004, 157-158.) Through critical reflection, it is possible

to expose powerful processes that some people and groups benefit from and others miss out, as well as to provide an opportunity for alternative meanings to be articulated in evaluation planning. Also, social work and related occupations rest clearly on a value base that entails respect for service users, promotion of their choices and rights and stresses the aim of working towards equality and social justice in society. Consequently, in research and evaluation, these values should be expected to be paramount. (Banks & Barnes 2005, 241.) This is possible if evaluation planning seeks to empower service users, and researchers seek to promote anti-discriminatory, anti-oppressive and emancipatory research (see e.g. Butler 2003).

EXPERIENCES ON CRITICAL REFLECTION

The critical reflection I made in the present article raised some new dimensions in the evaluation planning that we did not consider while the planning process was going on. Critical reflection was a good method for a critical evaluation where the purpose of evaluation was not merely to provide better or more realistic accounts of phenomena but to place a value on them and to show what should be changed. Critical reflection would be at its most powerful when done simultaneously with the evaluation planning and implementation phases - not only like I did after the whole evaluation had been carried out. Gardner (2003, 209) suggests critical reflection should be used also before the whole evaluation process has started, in order to be clearer about whether to become involved in the evaluation or not. Because critical reflection is committed to certain values, it is important that all the participants' expectations about them are clear before starting the process.

In critical reflection, I have used mainly the empowering evaluation approach represented by Adams (2003). Empowering evaluation provided good tools for critical reflection, though Adam's (2003) theory on empowering evaluation is mainly directed towards evaluating self-help groups. Nevertheless, Adams' theory helped to see behind the usual patterns in evaluation planning; particularly the major role of professionals compared to lay participants, and suggested how to move from professional practices towards

a more client-oriented, participating and participatory mode of action (see also Kuronen 2004, 280). There are many other critical theories available (e.g. feminist theory or anti-discriminatory or anti-oppressive theories) which would also be good tools for a critical reflection. Other theories could also have helped raise different points and themes in the evaluation plan and the planning process.

In critical reflection, I could have concentrated more on structures and processes through which subjectivities are shaped and maintained and on how different solutions in evaluation planning define roles and power positions in forthcoming evaluation. Evaluation planning is a phase where certain roles and power positions could be deconstructed and reconstructed instead of strengthening the existing ones. In deconstructing power and power relations, the major types and sources of power should be identified, and how they are understood and used by different players in the situation. In the reconstruction stage, the main focus should be on enacting the series of changes indicated by the foregoing analysis. It may involve negotiating a shift into a system of power relations and structures which is experienced as empowering for all parties. (Fook 2002, 104-108.)

Critical reflection is a form of research, in that it involves ongoing documentation of practice and provides information about how practice can and should be changed. It allows for researcher interaction with participants and for research respondents to participate as researchers in a joint process of data creation. The forging of a partnership is not easy to establish with people who have been victims of traditional attitudes and negative self-images. And for the researcher it may be difficult to relinquish the role of expert, imposing one's ideas consciously or unconsciously. To counter these tendencies, researchers must engage in explicit reflexivity. That is, they need to examine privately and publicly the sources of social power in their lives and how these sources appear in their research. (See also Fook 2002, 129-130; 157; Sohng 1995.)

How can the results of this kind of research be objective, since the purpose of the research is motivated by the political goals of helping the silenced and powerless people? The answer is that this kind of knowledge cannot be judged

in terms of the validity standards emulated from natural sciences, which deal only with the physical world. Critical knowledge validates itself in creating a vehicle of transformation and social change. (See also Sohng 1995.) This dimension of validity concerns itself with the skills and sensitivities of the researcher, in how one uses oneself as a knower, as an inquirer. Critical reflection that meets the criteria presented above can be seen to be an extremely valuable and powerful tool for critical evaluation.

According to Banks and Barnes (2005, 242), it should offer an alternative to traditional evaluations and research. It is especially important in a climate where much evaluation and research is commissioned and controlled by government bodies and senior agency managers, with the assumption that service users will feed into the process as passive respondents. I agree with them in this and see that critical reflection fits well with the evaluation ethics, values and political commitments of social work and related occupations. I also see that critical reflection is suitable and worth considering in evaluation which aims, as Banks and Barnes (2005, 241) say, "to work towards developing research participants' understanding of the political and policy context in which they are operating, with a view to bringing about radical change".

NOTES

¹ VARPUNEN derives from the Finnish phrase "VARhainen PUuttumiNEN", in English "Early Intervention".

² David Fetterman (2001) also talks about empowerment evaluation. According to him, empowerment evaluation has its roots in community psychology, action anthropology, and action research, but he does not open this theoretical background very much (Fetterman 2001, 10). Partly due to this, it seems to be closer to the collaborative and the participatory approaches than to the critical evaluation approach.

³ Chen (1990, 2004, 2005) also talks about theory-driven evaluation but not exactly in the same way as critical evaluators do. According to Chen (2005, 16), a theory-driven evaluation is guided by a programme theory. A programme theory is the specification of what must be done to achieve the desired goals, what other important impacts may also be anticipated, and how these goals and impacts would be generated (Chen 1990, 43). A programme theory is the systematic configuration of stakeholders' perspective assumptions (what action must be taken) and descriptive

assumptions (what causal processes are expected to happen) (Chen 2004, 136). Critical evaluation is cautious about "the temptation" to treat any claims as truth and to regard the scientific method as having replaced the essential process of judgement -making about "the good" (Everitt & Hardiker 1996, 51-52). Furthermore, Chen (2005, 47; 2004, 139) sees that evaluators must be able to select the evaluation approach that complements the needs and realities they face and that is appropriate for their evaluation situation. Critical evaluation needs considerable and total commitment to the ethics, values and politics that only critical theories involve (Everitt & Hardiker 1996, 23-25, 98-100).

⁴ Five different unpublished interview-based needs assessments have been made in the VARPUNEN project: (1) Tarveanalyysi (2003); (2) Projektihenkilöstön tekemä tarveanalyysi (2004); (3) Projektihenkilöstön tekemät kuntakierrokset (2004); (4) Kentälle suuntautuneet kohdennetut vierailukäynnit (2004); (5) SOTE-selvitys (2003).

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