

Ewa JOACHIMCZAK

Institute of Political Studies of the PAS, Warsaw, Poland

ACADEMIC EMPIRICAL TRACKS VERSUS POLISH RESEARCH EXPERIENCE IN THE EVALUATION OF PUBLIC RESOURCES

Key words

Evaluation, evaluation studies, social studies, empirical studies, sociology, public funds, European Union.

Summary

This article is an attempt to deal with the assessment of the situation that exists between the theoretical plane of discourse (or rather its lack) regarding the social research, especially the evaluation, and social, primarily institutional arguments driving and supporting this type of sociological or research practice.

An outline of these two areas seems to be quite important, because the evaluation studies have been retracted to the outskirts of the science. There seems to be a kind of disagreement in the academic world and even an invisibility of such practices. The existing weaknesses of these studies in the academic debate over the terms of their theoretical and practical functions are also perceived.

Therefore, the question arises: Is this lack of debate and the presence of the evaluation practice "disgraced" by the alleged theoretical deficiencies somehow defended by institutional advantage or social need, or are there any major reasons behind the few theoretical debates and attempts to marginalize evaluation practices?

Attempting to describe theoretical and practical dimensions seems to be quite important. The intention of the author, using her own ideal concept

of science, is to deter detached and external ratings that ignore the social context of purposes and cognitive tasks, in which the theory and research practice fit together in a confrontation with the need conditioned by the current situation in the country, which includes the functioning in the structures of the European Union.

Preface

Evaluation research is a form of social research, and social studies are an attempt to "learn" social life [1]. This is because we are trying to understand and predict in order to make the right decisions and achieve the intended goals. Usually, current knowledge is used for these tasks. However, in the era of society striving for knowledge, we more often support ourselves with science to give credibility, reliability, and fairness to our decisions. The science that has developed many tools to provide clear empirical evidence aimed at predicting the social reality is called sociology.

Sociology, presented critically in the introduction, has quite interesting structures such as its constituent features that determine disputes. These disputes relate to the subject matter, methods, tools, social roles, and positions among academic disciplines, and even "the erudition." It results from the fact that it is more about itself than the surrounding reality that sociology should serve. When something gets out of its control was proved by science to be unpredictable, it starts to develop the theoretical and methodological workshop *de novo*.

Meanwhile, the science is coming up to the next issue, the next critical reception and doubt, that is a fairly typical scientific phenomenon, because (as already many noted [2]) often, in the average scientist, a philosopher awakens who doubts the existing dogma and discusses, with astonishing regularity and persistence, fundamental matters again. This time it is neither a war of positivist sociology against humanism, nor the objectivist approach versus the subjectivist, nor the normative versus the interpretative paradigm, nor even quantity supporters versus quality supporters. This raises the reluctance of sociologists-academics toward sociologists-contractors. Taking into consideration that the need of evaluation activities is rapidly increasing in Poland, not only in the area of public spending, most of these "artists" can be found just in the evaluation.

1. Evaluation in Poland

Before the Polish accession to the European Union, the Polish experience in evaluation as an essential element of public management was small in comparison with other European countries. At some point in history, especially in the late 80s and 90s at the time of transition from the polity to the market economy, there existed, some say, "ideal conditions." But at that time,

there were no attempts to assess efforts to diagnose and evaluate the economic policy of the state, perhaps because in the public finances the economic system and polity the transformation occurred very slowly, which meant that there was no need to subject spending and public programs under evaluative procedures. According to the experts (e.g. J. Szlachta), Poland, until the end of the 1990s, did not have a chance to expand the evaluation activities on spending of public funds [8].

Changing of this situation arose with the launch of the PHARE program, and other pre-accession programs such as ISPA and SAPARD. At the launch of these funds for specific projects and programs (at the request of the European Commission), individual evaluations have progressively emerged. For policy evaluations, there are some positive and very important examples of Polish institutions where systematic evaluations of the effectiveness and – to a lesser extent – the effectiveness of actions taken have been made. Examples include the Polish Agency for Regional Development, Polish Agency for Enterprise Development and the Office of the Committee for European Integration [10].

On a larger scale, evaluation activities have been started in relation to the Polish accession to the European Union. Poland has become beneficiary of EU cohesion policy since May 1 2004, and access to the Structural Funds and the Cohesion Fund was related to the need for the community to implement solutions for the evaluation. From this point, there has been an impressive development, and not only in evaluation studies, that use an arsenal developed by research tools of the social sciences, but also the institutional expansion of evaluation mainly in non-academic institutions.

2. Evaluation and science

It seems that the evaluation has managed to take over the Polish reality. The word is at the beginning, so difficult to define and is not likely to find a Polish counterpart that would become almost the day-to-day magic "key." A current question is whether, with the rise of evaluation research, in the light of the most up to date and popular jargon, there has been the definition of "human evaluation," "institution evaluation," or perhaps even "social evaluation" coined. Before the third financial perspective evaluation studies were using conditions, and in fact the EU directives has affected more and more strongly and confidently on the structure of economic, social and political, and perhaps even (which is a wish for a number of Utopians) a value system.

One would like to say that the evaluation studies in Poland were born as a specific response to the emergence of a new type of social order – order aimed at developing the economy. However, the truth is different, because evaluation studies were imposed on us. Professor Antoni Sulek says (possibly quoting somebody else) that evaluation studies has mastered our area so quickly, as an indiscriminate beetle, which in the country by the river Vistula found

no major "enemies." However, a reduction to a mere disagreement with the existence of the pool of evaluation research, results in the same criticism, which is a kind of reluctance or disagreement, but only as such. Such an attitude does not provide any proposals to accept demands for changing anything in this type of practice, and that is not what it should be about.

In this paper, the key issue seems to be whether the applicable evaluation studies in general have any appearance of scientific research (and what that would actually mean), or whether they are purely a social activity, which differs little from the routine administrative activities. The consequences of the fact that research in this embodiment, which currently prevails, is not the invention of science, but society, appear at different levels. Determination to what extent these consequences are serious, and how much they undermine the reasonableness of research as a scientific practice (and not social) and their educational value, is still dependent on the theoretical opposition of the critics.

Numerous comparisons of specialists involved in the evaluation activity show that evaluation is not a scientific study; although, it uses scientific methods as much as it is possible. One of the most common misconceptions is granting the evaluation its own social identity, always directed at a specific object, rather than seeking to discover general regularities or assertions broader than the individual scope. This is also a range of diversion that the evaluation focuses on the appurtenance with respect to a defined object in a particular place and time [7]. This position is also confirmed by others [10].

According to the researchers, in practical research of empirical sociology, methods of collecting information, for the most part, were not created by sociology as a science. Such a practice – a type of knowledge creation experience – was born earlier than the systematic attempts to recognize and describe in terms of sociological practice, or even scientific practice [5]. This is also true in case of evaluation studies, in which it had been learned how to combine cognitive and theoretical imagination with a reliable workshop. Activities adopted by the evaluation of European Union funds as its own practice was and still is the first social practice. The validity and meaning of the Polish evaluation flow from social sources, and not scientific ones.

Another issue that is used in the evaluation in order to realize the objectives are cognitive tools (especially positivist ones), that, as it turns out, are not inventions of sociological theories. Traditionally, it is considered that empirical studies were born twice. The first time in Western Europe, empirical studies were born as a response to social problems of nascent capitalism. The second time in the United States – after World War II – in the form of market research. Sociology was rather some form of data collection concerning society as an attempt to transform, in a methodological way, administration tools, and to reform movements in research tools [5]. Therefore, the question arises: Why does the law allow such a strong criticism of the tools used in evaluation studies,

and in general in the study as such? In recent philosophy of science, it is being increasingly assumed that all activities are primarily a social practice [5].

However, the opinion of scientists, the experts, and all the people involved in evaluation show that the theoretical foundations for evaluation activities undertaken in Poland were very weak. The majority of them surely think that it is still so, even taking into consideration that the theory of evaluation has been developing very quickly worldwide in recent year, including Poland. However, in our country, it is still believed that the distance of sphere theory in relation to practical evaluation research is constantly increasing. Proponents of this view are derived primarily from academic structures. They believe that many evaluators in Poland have very limited knowledge of evaluation theory and the latest developments and trends in this area [4].

Such criticism has grown for three reasons. The first reason is the lack of continuity in evaluation activities in the Poland. This is due to factors, such as historical background, and the lack of needs and examples of good practice, and ignorance of the benefits resulting from these types of tools. The second reason is the dominance of companies on the market for consulting that are focused on the practical realization of research – so called, "performers" of research. They are not expected to be directly involved in the creation and development of the theory and methodology. They work primarily as researchers to test already formulated theories or as researchers practicing a kind of applied sociology. Their task is to solve practical problems in terms of the tools recommended by theories developed in an academic environment [5]. The third reason for this was the lack of research and scientific publications. That is why so often (especially in the first programming period) evaluators considered the European Union regulations and methodical notebooks of the European Union, and they eventually used the methodological achievements of the National Evaluation Unit (formerly the National Evaluation of Assessment) functioning under the Ministry of Regional Development. This process was positively influenced by the European Commission's published set of indicative guidelines for evaluation, which replaced the theory of some teams, but overall guide very positively the course of evaluation activities [4].

The evaluation grew out of the need to make conscious changes and build a strategic vision for development. It had and has to enable effective management, streamline planning systems, extrapolate trends, and consciously shape the future. Society rather than science is the real source of the legitimacy of empirical sociology practice (methodological doctrine attempting to present it as a tool for the construction of theory), the criticism of the doctrine and its unmasking neither affects the practice, nor – more importantly – enlightens it in any way [Comparison taken from A. Giza-Poleszczuk 1990]. This reflection leads to the question of what is more important: a theoretical and methodological verification or a social success.

Moreover, the critical arguments directed against evaluation studies are so diverse and seemingly aimless. Are the evaluation studies aimed at research, research tools, “the contractors,” the funding, the results, or the social situation? However, from the perspective of “strength,” it might seem dangerous that within this strength itself the social relationships, collective strength of power, and authority are formed.

3. Evaluation research as a socio – historical phenomenon

Evaluation research is a kind of social practice that is inherently linked to the specific needs, goals, or the state of the society. It could be said that there is an attempt to treat it as a neutral scientific practice that is so much needed and involved in the creation of the theory just “en passant,” because entanglements abstracted from any context, more powerfully reveals its foundation. Therefore, evaluation studies could safely be called historical phenomenon. In Poland, the evaluation clearly was “born” at a certain time in connection with certain events (the Polish accession to the European Union). Many important studies that have been used in the construction of the currently functioning evaluation system took place in the pre-accession period. However, the actual development of the evaluation system in Poland took place after its accession to the European structures in 2004.

On the other hand, evaluation studies are a social phenomenon (including institutional), because of the fact that they were a response to specific social needs, to serve a specific purpose and have been created by concrete social changes.

If, therefore, the birth of evaluation studies associates with certain economic and social changes that are a socio-historical phenomenon, it means that they are a part of particular (concrete, specific historically and institutionally) social reality, that sets them up for life and provides incentives for expansion and development. Evaluation studies are not only research *par excellence*, but they are the subject of research as a social fact. They require a historical and theoretical approach and a sociological description.

Conclusion

Hence, an important question arises whether this dynamic connected with the drastic development of evaluation research in its current form, together with still legitimizing methodology, associates also with scientific (theoretical) successes that result from the use of tools developed by science, or perhaps associates only with the institutional imperatives and social achievements that use data as a basis for rationalization imposed by the “other” moves. Undoubtedly, the inclusion of evaluation research practiced in Poland in

a sphere of science could earn them, unattainable in any other way, rank and purport in the era of faith in the progress of science.

However, one would like the evaluation research to become a factor for progress – above the theoretical progress – of social science. However, one gets the impression that the theory creates its own reality according to its logic and potential, and life imposing a practical action takes place somewhere nearby.

References

1. Babbie E.: *Badania społeczne w praktyce (Social research in practice)*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2005.
2. Borejsza J.W., Głowiński M., and others (ed.): *Czy kryzys socjologii? (Whether the sociology crisis?)*, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1977.
3. *Encyklopedia Socjologii, tom 1 (A–J)*, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 1998. (Encyclopedia of Sociology).
4. *Ewaluacja ex-ante – podsumowanie doświadczeń administracji polskiej*, Ministerstwo Rozwoju Regionalnego, Warszawa 2007. (Ex-ante evaluation of programming documents for 2007-2013, key issues).
5. Giza-Poleszczuk A., Mokrzycki E. (red.): *Teoria i praktyka socjologii empirycznej*, Polska Akademia Nauk, Instytut Filozofii i Socjologii, Warszawa 1990. (Theory and practice of empirical sociology)
6. Haber A. (red.): *Ewaluacja ex-post. Teoria i praktyka badawcza*, Polska Agencja Rozwoju Przedsiębiorczości, Warszawa 2007. (Ex-post evaluation. Theory and research practice).
7. Korporowicz L.: *Ewaluacja zorientowana na rozwój*, artykuł z "Dyrektora Szkoły" numer 10/2010. (Evaluation oriented on development).
8. Mazur S. (red.): *Ewaluacja funduszy strukturalnych – perspektywa regionalna*, Uniwersytet Ekonomiczny w Krakowie, Kraków 2007. (Evaluation of structural funds – regional perspective).
9. Mokrzycki E. (red.): *Kryzys i schizma. Antyscjentystyczne tendencje w socjologii współczesnej*, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1984. (The crisis and schism. Antiscientistic trends in contemporary sociology).
10. Olejniczak K., Kozak M., Ledzion B. (red.): *Teoria i praktyka ewaluacji interwencji publicznych. Podręcznik akademicki*, Wydawnictwo Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warszawa 2008. (Theory and practice of public interventions evaluation. Academic handbook).
11. Olejniczak K.: *Mechanizmy wykorzystania ewaluacji. Studium ewaluacji średniookresowych INTERREG III*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar Sp. z o.o., Warszawa 2008. (Mechanisms of using evaluation. Studium of medium-term evaluation INTERREG III).
12. Sułek A., Nowak K., Wyka A.: *Poza granicami socjologii ankietowej*, Uniwersytet warszawski Instytut Socjologii i Polskie Towarzystwo socjolo-

giczne Oddział Warszawski, Warszawa 1989. (Beyond the boundaries of surveyed sociology).

13. Wyka A.: *Badacz Społeczny wobec doświadczenia*, Wydawnictwo Instytutu Filozofii i Socjologii PAN, Warszawa 1993 (Social scientist towards experience).

Akademickie ścieżki empiryczne a polskie doświadczenia badawcze w ewaluacji środków publicznych

Słowa kluczowe

Ewaluacja, badania ewaluacyjne, badania społeczne, badania empiryczne, socjologia, środki publiczne, Unia Europejska.

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą zmierzenia się z oceną sytuacji istniejącej pomiędzy teoretyczną płaszczyzną dyskursu (a raczej jej braku) dotyczącą badań społecznych typu ewaluacyjnego a społecznymi, w tym głównie instytucjonalnymi, racjami napędzającymi i podtrzymującymi ten typ badawczej czy socjologicznej praktyki.

Zarys tych dwóch dziedzin wydaje się o tyle ważny, że badania ewaluacyjne zostały odsunięte na pozycję przedpola nauki. W środowiskach akademickich daje się zauważyć swoistą niezgodę, a nawet niezauważalność tego rodzaju praktyk. Dopatrzyć się też można istniejącego niedowładu tychże badań w dyskusji akademickiej nad warunkiem ich teoretycznego i praktycznego funkcjonowania.

Rodzi się zatem pytanie, czy ów niedostatek dyskusji oraz trwanie „skompromitowanej” poprzez rzekome teoretyczne braki praktyk ewaluacyjnych da się je jakoś obronić, na przykład instytucjonalną przewagą, potrzebą społeczną? Czy też za niezbyt dużą ilością teoretycznych debat i prób zepchnięcia na margines tychże stoją raczej poważniejsze?

Podjęcie próby opisu tych (teoretycznych i praktycznych) całości wydaje się dość ważne. Zamiarem autorki jest zniechęcenie do ocen oderwanych i zewnętrznych, ignorujących – w imię własnego ideału nauki – społeczny kontekst celów i zadań poznawczych, w których teoria i praktyka badawcza dopasowują się do siebie w konfrontacji z potrzebą warunkowaną przez aktualną sytuacją kraju – funkcjonowaniem w strukturach Unii Europejskiej.