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Boekbespreking van: Responsief Evalueren

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that there is no world outside us, but they do say that the essence or the truth of that world is within us. They are thus not of the opinion that the 'world' permits everything.

The two other alleged starting points of conventional policy evaluation have been greatly amended. Dryzek, for example, put the importance of policy science for policy implementation into perspective a number of years ago. He noted that there are no undisputed, tested theories with regard to policy interventions. Bovens and 't Hart have shown the relative meaning of policy evaluations and have given post-modernistically inspired adjustments of existing methods in various areas. Dryzek, as well as Bovens and 't Hart, none of whom are minor figures in policy science, do not think in terms of the idea that scientific knowledge is universally manageable and can serve as an instrument for rationalizing systems and emancipating people without any problems.

The more detailed picture that Abma paints of policy evaluations, of which she is not very fond, is very one-sided. The suggestion that researchers prefer to use an experimental design in a policy evaluation, demonstrates a great lack of knowledge of these types of studies. Almost all the handbooks that consider such a research design superior, report that an experimental design is generally impossible in the world of policy and therefore does not often appear in policy evaluations. This is why researchers have developed alternative designs. For example, the American Yin can be mentioned in his context.

Abma furthermore assumes that the conventional evaluator unquestioningly takes the official policy aims as the starting point of the evaluation. This may undoubtedly happen, especially in the world of policy consultancy agencies, but the more serious researcher will certainly take the warnings from an influential article by Herweijer to heart. For that matter, it is striking that, judging by her references, Abma does not know this article, which was published in 1981. Herweijer pointed out that, among others, the official and actual aims can differ and that aims can shift over time. In addition, Scriven a.o. has pointed out that evaluations can also take place without accounting for the interests and needs of the target group of a policy.

The questionable sketch that Abma gives of conventional policy evaluation does not of course imply that the responsive evaluation that she supports, does not have any value. Abma's version of responsive evaluation is not easy to reproduce, but can anyhow be conceived as an interactive process. In the words of one of the founders of this approach: it concerns a method in which the design gradually develops on the basis of issues that present themselves in the natural setting. In this way, responsive policy evaluation displays a connection with the grounded theory-approach of Glaser and Strauss.

Responsive evaluation claims to make use of 'adaptive and reprogrammable' observation instruments. The evaluator himself is seen to be the best observation instrument because a human being is flexible and responsive. Apart from the fact that this grossly overestimates the human capacity to process information, the gathering of impressions is also declared to be a reliable observation method. The reading of a

basic handbook of psychology would have made it clear that human observations are not always equally reliable. Furthermore, this view of human observation expresses a naive belief in the possibilities of studying 'reality' without preconceptions and theories. It is strange that, with regard to other scientific approaches, Abma formulates the criticism that these approaches do not realize that a researcher's values, interests, experiences and preconceptions can never be switched off (p.103), while earlier (p.94) she gives a checklist that is supposed to safeguard the researcher from subjective interpretations. Furthermore, it can be noted that the idea that the actual picture of that which was studied will spontaneously arise from the data, this being part of the gospel of the grounded theory approach, is fictitious.

Responsive evaluation is ruled by the idea that everyone, but particularly the weaker persons in society, must be heard and their realities must serve as the basis of a negotiation process with those involved in a certain policy. The evaluator acts as a sort of 'process manager'. This manifests itself, for example, in the second research question, namely: "How can an evaluator facilitate interactive processes by extending the sense?"

Responsive evaluation seems to be like a therapy that has to enable people in a policy context to make equal contributions, or an endeavour for emancipation that aims to let people without a say in matters be heard. This is not unimportant, but it has nothing to do with performing an evaluation. Of course one can stretch evaluation-research to such a point that it also contains therapies and an endeavour for emancipation. But in my opinion, this is not very wise, because if words can mean everything, they will be meaningless.

On the one hand, Abma's study is a discussion of literature about different approaches of policy evaluation, and on the other hand, it is propaganda for responsive evaluation. Abma answers her research question by means of stories about evaluation studies conducted by herself and others, which are difficult to interpret. It would have been natural for the author to compare conventional and responsive evaluations in detail, in order to decide which of the two contributes more to making sure everyone involved is heard; the processing of the different interests; and getting an interactive policy process going. Unfortunately there was no comparative, systematic design, so that, contrary to what Abma thinks, nothing can be said about the superiority of responsive policy evaluations.

No founded judgement can be given on the research methods the researcher actually employed. This is simply because she does not provide any clear information about them. Moreover, she does not find this important. She says the following about one of the evaluation studies that she discusses:

'Although the first name on the cover of the book suggests that the researcher is a human being of flesh and blood, a distance is created further on. As the reader, I get the impression that I am dealing with an expert. This is strengthened by the very extensive methodological justification.'

Apparently Abma is of the opinion that the verification of research, through the presentation of the research methods employed, leads to dehumanisation of the researcher with the intention of making the product inviolable. Undoubtedly various scientific studies can be pointed to that can be made more accessible. I think that not resorting to jargon and gibberish that is hard for non-scientists to understand, is something worth striving for. The consequence of Abma's view, however, is that it is impossible to check up on how certain statements are arrived at. In fact, this is not surprising because she finds that there is no difference between fact and fiction.

Even if one has a less strict view of science – I find myself in the camp of the methodological anarchist Paul Feyerabend – little good can be said of Abma's thesis. Although it is generally less easy to say something about the productivity of theories and the reliability of methods of observation than the supporters of Popper and Lakatos often think, this does not alter the fact that they should provide insight and be able to be criticized. The latter is not the case with Abma. She says the following about her own text:

'I advise readers not to read the text in its entirety or reject it as an academic intellectual, but to accept it and to reject it, to use it as a handbook, to manipulate the text as it fits the reader, and to use it to one's own satisfaction.'

This proposition by Abma basically amounts to abandoning any discussion. This is in fact consistent because, although in a different context, she notes that argumentation and the ability to criticize are undesirable. Abma in fact rejects the demands made by responsivists such as Guba and Lincoln about communication, namely the possibility to criticize in an argumentative dialogue. She says that this demand leads to expressions that do not live up to the prevailing rules of language, being shut out. In order to do justice to differences, the argumentative dialogue should not be pursued. If Abma's view were to become generally accepted, a free discussion no longer seems possible. Even worse, every form of communication would change to vacantly absorbing the text that is being delivered. It seems doubtful whether a democratic society can continue to exist on the basis of this type of communication. Scientific research would, in any case, be ruined.

The project of the post-modern philosopher Rorty can, among others, be characterized as the systematic removal of all unnecessary concepts and problems. Concepts and other linguistic utterances are unnecessary if they are obscure and meaningless in the way that Schopenhauer intends: they do not contain any pretexts that allude to and explain the world. Abma's thesis is full of such linguistic utterances. In addition to the last quote about accepting and rejecting texts at the same time, here is just one example concerning the strategy for collecting data that might have been used:

'We have, in close co-operation with the employees of the psychiatric centre Welterhof, tried to interrupt the dominant discourse by telling other stories, in the hope that these will serve as a source of inspiration for other practices, get something going, start an unforeseen movement. Following the Russian Michael Bakhtin (1953/1981), I have called this narrative strategy 'dialogical imagination'.' (p. 193)

Abma has ill-served post-modernism with her thesis. The accumulation of words that she has produced makes it easy for scientists with a traditional attitude to dismiss the views of this philosophical school. This is regrettable because post-modernism – even if one does not embrace it as a believer – can be important; for example for socio-scientific research into the rationality of human actions. Maybe the same comments apply to post-modernism as Feyerabend made about Kuhn's philosophy of science:

'Kuhn's ideas are interesting, but unfortunately they are too vague to be able to lead to anything but nonsense. Whoever does not believe this should take a look at the literature. Never before have so many works in the philosophy of science been written by creeps and bunglers. Folks that don't have the slightest idea about why a stone falls toward the ground, are encouraged by Kuhn to talk about the scientific method in a confident manner.'

Oscar van Heffen