SYSTEMIC APPROACH FOR CHANGE AGENT -
A NEGOTIATED EVALUATION FRAMEWORK FOR THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to introduce a negotiated evaluation framework for translating social program in complex situations. Based on the national characteristics of China and the complex nature of translating social program, the author faced many challenges of translating an adolescent development program from Hong Kong to China at once. By adopting the ideas of developmental evaluation and the theory of boundary critique, the author eventually formulated the evaluation framework in handling of the challenges. Example of using the framework is illustrated, and the reflection of using the framework is also discussed.

Keywords: Critical Systems Thinking; Evaluation; Social Development; Translational Science

NATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CHINA

A review of the literature has asserted that traditional cultures, diversified contexts, and political ecology are the barriers of translating social development initiatives for the social development in China. First of all, integration of Confucianism and other traditional Chinese cultural constructs with imported social program is a necessary but not sufficient factor to determine the program effectiveness in PRC. According to a series studies of Yip (1999; 2003; 2004; 2005a; 2005b), they demonstrated that the traditional Chinese cultural ideas and concepts, such as Confucianism and Taoism, are still able to make an impact on the thinking and behavior of Chinese, although the degree of influence should be varied. The variation should relate to the effect of other competing political ideologies such as socialism and capitalism, and the differences of understanding and experience to those traditional Chinese cultures.

Second, some other scholars have weighted the issue of internal diversity among Chinese communities, and therefore argue for no direct transplantation of any intervention and practice from one particular Chinese community to the other being relevant. For example, Sin (2008) and Tsang and Yan (2001) argue that there is intersecting diversity within and between Chinese communities, and they appeal social work scholars in the West not prescribing a single and unified approach to the Chinese colleagues. It also implies that experience and outcome at a particular Chinese community seems not able to be simply assumed relevant to all other Chinese regions. Several Chinese scholars (Wang, 2000; Yuen-Tsang & Ku, 2008; Yuen-Tsang & Wang, 2002) even questioned whether the social work knowledge transplanted from Hong Kong or other Western societies are able to be indigenized in the diversified contexts of China or not.

Third, even an implementation of a social development program in China is a political issue. With reference to the literature of indigenous social work practice in PRC, Yan and Tsang (2008) asserted that the social work practice in PRC is a political process involving a complex interaction between agents who represent the "bentude" (native and local) and the "bentuduade" (imported and adapted) knowledge and practice and derive benefits from them. Yan and Tsang (2008, p. 193) further argue that social work indigenization in PRC is not a rational modification process undertaken by a singular agent but a selective assimilation process involving multiple agents or players. They selectively assimilate parts or components of the so-called Western social work system according to their relevance and utility in serving the political agenda of the state, and the respective interests of the other players involved. As a result, the above-mentioned traditional cultural elements of the indigenous practice in PRC could be legitimate, however, only if it is consistent with the storyline of Chinese authorities. Besides, Wang (1997) proposed that at least three contextual factors should be concerned for indigenized social work practice in PRC. They

are: traditional Chinese culture, ideologies of socialism and related discourse developed in the contemporary China, and the socio-cultural influences of economic reform in the China since 1978.

COMPLEX NATURE OF SOCIAL PROGRAM TRANSLATION

The literature of psychology (Neulip, 1991; Schoenwald & Hoagwood, 2001; Tashiro & Mortensen, 2006; Van de Vijver & Leung, 1997), prevention science (Botvin, 2004; Meyer, Miller, & Herman, 1993), translational research (Khoury et al., 2007; Woolf, 2008), human service studies (Brekke, Kathleen, & Palinkas, 2007; Glasgow, 2009; Hawkins, 2006; Jenson, 2006; O'Donnell, 2008; Rohrbach, Grana, Sussman, & Valente, 2006), and program evaluation (Urban & Trochim, 2009; Chen, 2005, 2010; Patton, 2002, 2004, 2008, 2011) also draw a conclusion that translation of an validated social program from one setting to the other is a complex process. The complexity can be further divided into three categories. They are: context, comprehensiveness, and collaboration. First, Glasgow (2009) listed out six areas of question to assess the contextual impacts on program dissemination and implementation. Those questions include: the person or organization required to be involved and not involved in the process; various intended outcomes of different participants, which need not equivalent to the expected program outcomes of the original program; organizational and personal characteristics of the participants to implement and disseminate the program, mediating and moderating factors of the program effectiveness; and program fidelity. Therefore, the success of program transplantation is far more than narrowly focusing the outcomes and impacts of original program attained in other settings. Second, a review of the literature shows that mix-methods approach is recommended to acquire a comprehensive understanding of aforementioned context (Brekke et al., 2007; Glasgow, 2009; Meyer et al., 1993; Woolf, 2008). Apart from using quantitative methods to study the program effectiveness, generalizability or external validity, and analyze those mediating and moderating factors contributing to the program effectiveness (Collins, Murphy, & Bierman, 2004; Flay et al., 2005; Hawkins et al., 2009; Schoenwald & Hoagwood, 2001), qualitative methods can be used to understand the details of program implementation (Hill, Maucione, & Hood, 2007; Ozer, Wanis, & Bazell, 2010). Finally, collaboration between researchers and program participants to prepare and evaluate the program implementation process and outcomes in new settings so as to enhance a shared sense of ownership to the entire issue is another issues identified that should be considered (Brekke et al., 2007; Hawkins, 2006; Meyer et al., 1993; Rohrbach et al., 2006; Urban & Trochim, 2009; Woolf, 2008).

FIELDWORK EXPERIENCES

Being a social worker and researcher participating in the social development in China for years, I have always puzzled how collective intelligence and the impact can be organized. Based on my fieldwork experiences of translating an adolescent development program into a secondary school in Guangzhou, there are following hurdles against my organizing work. First, despite the Handover of Hong Kong has been done since 1997, it is still difficult for me, as a Hong Kong Chinese, building a trust with Chinese officials in developing the program that might vacillate their status quo. Censorship does exist throughout the process. Second, although I have eventually established a working relationship with an education officer, no common agenda and shared measurement among his colleagues and subordinates had been made at once. Third, the program has been developing at the school in general, but this should be partly because of the authoritative and bureaucratic culture in China from time immemorial. Fourth, there is an ethical dilemma for me to develop and evaluate the program at the same time; I may be biased on my personal interest of developing the program (e.g. getting my PhD degree) unconsciously. Last but not least, the context revealed is not an ideal environment for collecting reliable and validated data and findings, according to a linear thinking of scientific research like experimental design.

NEOGOTIATED EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

In facing of the complex situation of translating social program reviewed in the literature, I have formulated a negotiated evaluation framework, which is based on developmental evaluation and the theory of boundary critique in critical systems thinking. And the main ideas of these two concepts are illustrated as follows:

Developmental Evaluation

Developmental evaluation is an evaluation approach and method "applying complexity concepts to enhance innovation and use" (Patton, 2011). This is closed related to utilization-focused evaluation, which emphasizes on that evaluation should be situationally responsive and politically sensitive throughout the evaluation process to identify and handle the dynamic change of stakeholders' focus or the emergence of evaluation method decisions (Patton, 2008, 207-209). There are two strategies identified to focus an evaluation study. First, a menu approach can be used to match the choice of evaluation model to the information needs and intended uses of primary intended users (Patton, 2008, 291-295). In this case, evaluator provides various choices of evaluation models to the intended users for their intended uses, in condition that all these models are being capable to be conducted. Second, the stage of program development can be a reference to identify the evaluation focus of this study (Patton, 2008, 295-299), which is within a specific period of time and limited by those resources available at that moment.

Developmental evaluation has further explained aforementioned ideas that the translation of a social program can be a synthesis of both "top-down" and "bottom-up" approaches to implement and evaluate the program through the collaboration of those well-intended and deeply committed people for their common sake of intended uses (Patton, 2011, 180). Top-down means that a social program should be implemented according to best practice models and effective principles and evaluated with high adherence to the original. Bottom-up means that a social program should be implemented based on local knowledge and grassroots innovation and evaluated with high relevancy to the complex context of program implementation. Patton states that his assertion is able to mediate the dialogue among the stakeholders to construct a shared understanding and direction for the program development and evaluation by identifying effective practice as well as nurturing ongoing local adaptation.

Although a general method conducting the evaluation of translating social program is illustrated, no specific guideline available in the literature to reveal the mediation process of facilitating various people upholding different approaches of social program development together. Besides, a doubt of evilness applying the middle-navigating approach to program evaluation has been addressed (Patton, 2011, 185-187). Actually, critiques on Patton's stance in evaluation, especially on the issue of ethical consideration, are also identified in the literature (Alkin, 1990, 2004; Donaldson, Patton, Fetterman, Scriven, 2010; Patton, 2008). Therefore, it is necessary to further illustrate a negotiation process so as to extend the utility of developmental evaluation.

Boundary Critique

The theory of boundary critique is chosen to rectify the use of developmental evaluation because of its areas of concern listed below (Midgley & Pinzon, 2011):

- *The link between people's value judgments (about what purposes it is right to purpose) and boundary judgments (what they see as relevant to those purposes), which helps us understand why the remit of OR [operational research] projects can sometimes be highly contested (Churchman, 1970);*

- *How situations involving people who make different value and boundary judgments can results in entrenched conflict, which needs to be accounted for in the design of OR projects (Churchman, 1979); and*

- *How people can reframe their understandings of a conflict, thereby making progress in addressing it, by exploring different perspectives on their boundaries of concern (Churchman, 1970; Manson & Mitroff, 1981).*

With reference to the tradition of critical systems thinking, Midgley and Pinzon (2011) further illustrate the theory of boundary critique with the following features. First, all knowledge is limited and informed by non-neutral values (Churchman, 1970) and therefore a need for pursuing a dialectical process, which require a rigorous self-reflection, as well as a sense of humbleness in face of different perspectives should be upheld (Churchman, 1979). Second, environmental factors is important in triggering and recognizing conflict (Churchman, 1970; Manson & Mitroff, 1981). Third, there is close relationship between value and boundary judgments (Ulrich, 1983). Therefore, conflict can be reframed through a fair dialogue process with a focus on different values. Fourth, a theoretical language in recognizing the systemic conditions that marginalization process of institutionalized tensions between scared and profane discourses on minorities is provided (Midgley, 1992, 2000).

Negotiation Process

Based on the theory of boundary critique reviewed, it is identified that the negotiation process of evaluating social program translation can be reframed as a marginalization of institutionalized tensions between sacred and profane discourses on the program development. Therefore, the key to managing the conflict process is to foster all the stakeholders involved to understand their own and the other＇s ethical stance so as to deliberate how the tension is maintained or changed by those people involved in the discussion of different discourses. Besides, all knowledge is limited and informed by non-neutral values and there is a close relationship between value and boundary judgment. As a result, there is not a must to uphold any best practice of program development and evaluation; it is also unnecessary to strike for achieving a consensus with all people involved to a particular intervention. The critical determinant of the legitimacy of translating the program becomes whether I have been deliberating my ethical reasoning to support the program development for myself and the others , allying the comrades with shared reasoning, and adjusting or insisting any tangible arrangement of the program development according to the ethical reasoning. As a result, similar with conception of ＂partnership＂ proposed by Patton (2011, 14-15), the role as a researcher or evaluator within this negotiated evaluation framework is no longer a value-free facilitator or mediator but a negotiator - the one trying to persuade and compromise with the stakeholders for the program development and evaluation according to the ethical reasoning deliberated.

CASE ILLUSTRATION

With reference to the my experiences of PhD study, it is identified that the ethical reasoning of various stakeholders can be categorized as the concepts of ＂best practices＂ and ＂effective principles＂ proposed (Patton, 2011, 167). Being a researcher and evaluator trying to translate a social program in China, I must recognize the ethical reasoning of ＂best practices＂ in the certain extent. And throughout the study process such as literature review, data collection, data analysis, I have also increasingly confirmed that my ethical reasoning can be in line with pragmatism (Patton, 2002a, 2008; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009), contextualism (Biglan, 2004; Ozer et al., 2010), and pragmatic utilitarian evaluation standard (Patton, 2002).

In order to collaborate with the stakeholders involved, I have done the following tasks for establishing agreement to translate the social program, conduct evaluation, and complete my PhD study. On one hand, I have tried to make a literature review to reveal the limitation of best practices approach for the comment and review of my supervisor. However, it does not aim at rejecting the use of any research findings; it is used for extending the utility of the best research findings available. For example, tension between fidelity and adaptation has been identified as the most significant discussion in the literature (Backer, 2002; Elliott & Mihalic, 2004, 50-51). As a result, apart from evaluating the level of adherence of the program implementation, I can also explore any adaptation occurred in the implementation and the reasons behinds according to related literature (Hill et al., 2007; Ozer et al., 2010). On the another hand, I requested the

program implementers trying to conduct the program according to the original design as much as possible. Of course, adaption was allowed but the reasons behind adaptation would be studied. There were 10 classes in total at the beginning agreed to implement the program. However, because of a program implementers did not agree to the idea of translation in principle, he quited and only nine classes implementing the program at last.

REFLECTION

As mentioned in the paper previously, according to the tradition of critical systems thinking, all knowledge is limited and informed by non-neutral values, and thus no perfect research, evaluation, and translation of social program can be obtained. I have decided to translate a social program from one place to the other, it imply that a boundary judgment has been made: there are some good practic exist somewhere, which are valuable to translate into different places for the local development. Nevertheless, this assertion does not being welcomed by all people. In the discipline of social work, this is not uncommon to discover the notion of criticizing best practice approach or so-called evidence-based practice (e.g.   Gray, Plath, & Webb, 2009; Gray, 2010; Gray & Coates, 2010). However, arguments of supporting best practice approach do exist (Gambrill, 2006; Thyer, 2006).As a result, in order to translate a social program, there must be a trade-off of including the people who are more accepting the discourse and excluding the people who do not agree on the notion in principle. In my opinion, recognizing this limitation always provide a space for me to insist on my own assertion with humble attitude. And it is believed that a real social development will occur only if some of the local people really utilize the translated program in a deliberative way.

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