Social Planning and Evaluation: The Abductive Logic

Eleonora Venneri

Dipartimento di Scienze Giuridiche, Storiche, Economiche e Sociali, "Magna Graecia" University, Catanzaro, Italy

Abstract   Starting from an analysis of the advanced arguments in support of social planning as a hermeneutic practice, the paper proposes a theoretical reflection on the process of evaluation of social policies. Particular attention is paid to the abductive logic that governs every step of the process and gives to social planning a dialogical and relational connotation. Beyond the outdated and "technocratic" vision of planning, it is stretched to the proactive participation of stakeholder in the construction of policies which is really effective and appropriate to the needs. This vision recognizes "secular consciousness" an enormous potential for the advancement of knowledge and retrieves a "creative fruitfulness" for policy-making, essential to the contingency and contextual embeddedness of intervention measures.

Keywords   Evaluation, Social Planning, Abduction, Culture

1. Introduction

Among the fundamental reasons that ascribe evaluation of social policies is a crucial importance, at least two seem worthy of observation. The first refers to the connotation of social planning as a process of social construction oriented to intelligent introduction of "adjustments for improvement" [1] in the system of protection and promotion of wellness; the second concerns the need to replace category of "sense" to "presumption of logic" [2] of absolute rationality, typical of traditional decision-making processes.

Generally defined a methodological process founded on inclusion, on expansion and feedback of cognitive contents, aimed at the co-construction of a symbolic and discursive context in which individuals taught to "think for relationships" [3], the evaluation improves the "expert knowledge", exorcises self-referentiality and is a source of social legitimacy of policies.

In perspective of planning as process of "interpretive research" of the social and, therefore, as exploration of specific meanings that communities subtend to complexity, to dynamicity, to diversification and to continuous evolution of needs that are not susceptible of standardization, evaluation postulates the renunciation to the ontological security of institutionalized knowledge, deconstructs and problematizes the representations of reality consolidated and contemplates (for institution and public) negotiation and hiring of additional responsibility for definition and pursuing of common goals.

In this regard, it is of particular opportunity a thorough reflection on cultural dimension that governs the evaluation process in social planning, establishes relevance and effectiveness of social policies, altering at the same time traditional architecture. The social planning, indeed, "lies extensively and decisively between the values - carried by a need – and their satisfaction and is characterized primarily in terms of an agreement between several subjects, interests and projects, finalized to ensure the future security of the social and cultural system" [4]. It is a process of "social discovery" [5], which compares heterogeneous elements that are not typical of classic rationality: the dialogical, ethical and cultural rationality (adequately supported and encouraged by the participative dynamics) is an integral part of a social planning that guarantees and ensures the continuous transaction between "government" and "environment", and legitimizes lawfulness and the quality of actions.

The specialized knowledge - Max Weber argued – "it is unable alone to establish the power of officials. To this must be added the knowledge of service". However, "without the administration and right of inquiry advertising " - equivalent, respectively, to administrative transparency and participation - "the technical and rational competence becomes "secret knowledge", removed from external control" [6].

In other words, "normative" rationality of social planning, ideologically entrusted to "complete" and "natural" identity of interests of each in front of the social system more generally, is such only in the logical sense of "plausible" and "'objectively possible." It does, however, corresponds to an arbitrary construction of "sense" of reality, transcends the indeterminateness and assimilate culture as "product anonymous" [7] of social relations, neglecting the representativeness of stakeholder.

Indeed, the present and imperative need to address the

so-called "end of governability" (in double sense of the critique of bureaucratic rationality and legitimacy of political power in the decision-making process) and the consequent necessity to replace the "organizational rituals" [8] of control and verification, coherence and consistency of the intervention measures to the specific symbolic and cultural dimensions of communities, introduces in a new era of commitment for the progressive decentralization of state functions and for design and evaluation of policies oriented toward "rewriting socially legitimized of social relations" [9].

Compared with the univocal ability to "prescribe" solutions to problems universally recognized, "strength" institutional is expressed in the responsible activation of forms of coordination (inter-institutional and social) between different actors for the management of common good: in an enlarged sense of the governance term, the management's efficiency of economic and social resources gives way to model decision-making processes characterized by openness, transparency and dynamism that regenerate, on a new basis, the processes of legitimation and consent. The citizen, which is not "client" (the consumerist perspective delimits the possibilities of choice and action to the only options available), but "partner" of public administration, actor active in public life and expression of a complex subjectivity, intentional, asking to be recognized and respected. He is able to express an opinion on the fundamental choices and is partner of the other "players" involved in a process of mediation/negotiation [10].

In this paper we will try to show how the multiplicity of meanings that any society (even locally demarcated) attaches to needs, resources, objectives of the action and, consequently, the choices of planning and measures to implement, is an integral part of an abductive conception of evaluation as expression of a cultural mediation of different semantic fields and of "creative" inference to policies, in some ways, "provisional", and therefore more and always susceptible to reformulation.

2. Abduction and Evaluation: What Affinity?

The progressive weakness of a "aggregative"[1] conception of the welfare system leads to the de-institutionalization of performance, to reformulation of the relationship between demand and supply of services and, in parallel, to characterization of the evaluation process as a control strategy of the system explicitly referred to "social value" generated by the policies examined [11]. This conception is matched by the creative and conjectural development policy strategies, not teleological or necessary. In this perspective, the assessment is similar to an "act of constructing meaning" [12], or a "thoughtful process of widespread cultural

competence" [13, 37].

For our purposes, with particular reference to elaboration of the pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce that, against "positivist metaphysics", tends to strongly defend the realism of common sense as source of knowledge and hypotheses "risky" (i.e., unproven hypothesis on the basis of interpretations assodate, according to commonly accepted codes), the suggestion raises useful and abductive reflections to assimilate the evaluation to a path of pragmatic dissemination of "critical" social learning. Implicitly, denies that the person has the ability to compute systematically and extensively their own beliefs and preferences with respect to a decision-making situation (maximizing the expected utility of optimizing strategies) and emphasizes on the contrary, heuristic contingency and flexibility of meaningful choices (conducive to the discovery of new results) in reference to the complexity of the issues and of information from time to time available to the decision-making contexts. On the other hand, "sententious" and "unique" assumptions, inspired by the criteria of deterministic causality, assume, often in a reductive and misleading modality, "perfect" information and the easy identification of all alternatives available for decision "very good", contrasts with the attempt to evaluate abductively a situation of risk, uncertainty and potential conflict in which the probabilities associated with the events are not known or cannot be estimated. At this level, the evaluation process agrees with the fundamental properties of abduction which don't imply the "truth" of the already known.

Basically, if induction and deduction may be certainly useful in a hypothetical (as implausible) view of implementation "algorithmic" policy, abduction presides to identification of linkages "adequate causality" between output, result and impact of interventions. It replaces the illusory truth claims of the 'performative' interpretation of perspectives with arguments and actions of all stakeholder involved in the interventions in relation to the organization, social and institutional framework within which the programs take place [14]. So, the finding of multiple analyses, "resets" knowledge and infers new information; leads to the "correction" of measures already made and creates a virtuous "validation" which, in turn, is information base for further analysis. The evaluation process tends to build up, therefore, an indefinitely succession "open" of knowledge of signs and meanings, beliefs and rules of action; This prevents that the evaluation can aspire to a complete and full adequation to reality and to establish itself as a tool of a planned act according to a "habit" [15] firmly acquired. If so, the assessment would amount only to a control of the regularity and legality of the obligations at the expense of a "pluralistic" conception which, in its stead, assigns to all those involved in decision-making and implementation, a decisive role in definition of criteria for judgment to be taken and of problems to be evaluated.

The constitution of signs and meanings takes place, in fact, over time; every semiotic act can never be repetitive and is affected by the "history" and "culture" of men as producers

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[1] In this sense, policies tend to address the needs on the basis of quantitative criteria for classifying non-specific "trends".

of signs; each occurrence of signs and interpretations are new; beliefs and rules of action are always forced to vary degrees to be restarted to deal with complexity; the meanings themselves have local and contingent nature and have high flexibility and variability.

In this perspective, if "the abductive conclusion is not give rise to a mere clarification of the semantic content of the premises, but to a shift of the semantic content" so that "the truth value of the conclusion abductive is not normally determined by the validity of the premises" [16], the possibility of increasing the effectiveness of programs through assessment implies a purely conceptual use of it. Than using "instrumental" (typical of the rational conception) that assigns to the evaluation the arduous and perhaps impractical opportunity to provide decision makers with accurate information, regardless of variability of specific contexts and on the basis of pre-existing theories, the conceptual usefulness of the evaluation process "presupposes a theory of actions that build themselves over the course of assessment" [17] and promotes elaboration of knowledge and insights into contact with different practices [18]. As well as, the abduction proves to be much more innovative than remote and unusual is the combination of different semantic fields, understanding the logics and reasons for the breaking of all actors involved in a decision-making process increases "cognitive specific gravity" of evaluation, increases thickness of the communicative symbolic interaction, leading to the transformation of creative and dynamic strategies of planning and to the construction of the best understanding of the meaning to be given to the future of social planning [19].

3. Abductive Logic, Evaluation and Social Complexity

To deal successfully with social complexity and unpredictable risk [20] means, in essence, to shy away from an ineffective reductionist approach to problems, to regenerate the factors of legitimacy and consensus that support and motivate the presence of the public sector in planning through dialogical forms of "higher learning" [3]. This is equivalent to attach "different frames" (to those institutional) that give a value-added to programming and, reflexively, change of the nuclei symbolic power [38]. The narrow limits of cost-effectiveness and the focus of the instrumental gap between expected and effectively results achieved by the policies (based on parameters and indices constructed a priori) are changed. Today, there are questions on the ability of programs to deal with the crux of the question unspoken, latent, unmet, or modification of the conditions of departure, unexpected outcomes, the utility generated and the overall coherence of social policies [11, 21].

The waiver of operations of self-objectification of facts, functional prerequisite "to govern in accordance with the essence of things" [22], weakens the logic of rationality "synoptic" [23] and the corresponding assimilation of the evaluation as process for a forecast (source of considerable distortion levels of validity, reliability and ability of the instruments used to measure the effects "weak" or provide adequate explanations and/or alternatives to the observed changes). Conversely, epistemologically and methodologically, the evaluation corresponds to a cognitive research for a "de-construction" of programs by virtue argumentative processes of participation.

The de-construction tends, in some ways, introduce "foreign" elements in discursive forms self-sufficient; the argument is, in turn, the expression of an abductive logic that replaces the mutability and the intangibility of the evaluation criteria to determinism; the participation, expression of a possible spread of the processing capabilities and ratification of decisions to all those who, in some way, can manage them and condition them, promotes a "creative dualism" between institutional representation and representation spontaneous [24] and leads to a co-construction consensual and legitimate of objects and actions evaluated.

At this level, compared to the linear sequence goals-means of neo-positivist approach, emerges the provisional nature of evaluative knowledge in changing contexts and uncertain; each result is transitory and subject to refutation; emphasis on the ability to generate "expert judgment" it is replaced by the ability to support an "informed dialogue" and to adopt a cognitive paradigm in which "the correct answers and a fully independent judgment are recognized as possible" [25]. The knowledge produced in decision-making contexts and evaluation, therefore, has "local" character, it cannot be generalized and requires an adaptation of knowledge "general" (hypothetical-deductive) to the cognitive dynamics that drive the same context [26].

On the other hand, the evaluation work is condemned to sterility if, faced with "new" tasks, using pre-packaged methodologies. If the evaluation is characterized as a constructive process "symbolic spaces" between subjects with different knowledge, it is innately oriented to "reopen the representations" of problems to interpret and decode the expectations of adequate services. All stakeholder have a proactive role; the definition of a problematic situation is not "a priori" or taken for granted, but must involve the joint contribution of all those involved in resolution. The same notion of social complexity (defined in terms of the large number and variety of elements and interactions in the context of a process of choice) assigns to shares and to individuals interests the character of the instability and mutability: every action produces new knowledge for the actors, with consequent adjustments of future operations. In the communicative characterization that follows and exceeds the "technocratic" vision of evaluation, the temptation of a definitive synthesis of cognitive categories gives way to inclusion, deliberation and dialogue between different symbolic skills.

4. Conclusions. Cultural Diversity and Evaluation: What Implications?

All the real social situations are "opened", they can and must be "interpreted" [7]. Implicit in such an admonition, is the reference to inability to reproduce models of planning and evaluation always and everywhere valid, regardless of historical and social reality.

As we have tried to show, the needs increasingly require new interpretation. Indeed, the reduction of social reality as "artificial" construction, "complex abstraction" and aggregate data, diminishes inevitably the "vitality" and, more importantly, forgets the special autonomy, productivity and dynamism of the "culture" that constantly invents, discovers, provides and promotes new interpretations and new possibilities of life. The concrete intervention measures are not simply a reflection of individual interests but rather the result of values, conceptions, ideas and ideals that influence the degree to which those measures are recognized and accepted by the communities. The cultural dimension, therefore, presides to the reduction and the extent of possible choices and circumscribes the adaptation of the options available to those relevant for the individuals. This is one of the reasons why, in different social contexts, the same type of policy is likely to have different effects. The social interventions, says Pawson, are so complex that "it is almost impossible to reproduce equally, but even if it were possible, they are so sensitive to the context that the" same "combination could fail" [27]. Nevertheless, usually "this knowledge of the universe of values, the world view, the culture of the community, is taken for granted. And is a big mistake" [24]. Particularly, this is an error that produces indifference of the communities for planning processes and thus causes their uselessness. A social change, "can occur in the case in which individuals for several reasons see in a new light their condition that, from the standpoint of objective, has remained unchanged. By varying the way in which an observer interprets the given conditions, the subjective definition of a situation can turn into action" [7]. In this perspective, compared to formulas inspired to programmatic considerations which, in the name of the causal power of the structural constraints, intentionally transcend the subjective and individual motivations, and in which the formal rationality of the choices and the bureaucratic ritualism appear the only strategy for social organizations "defensive", the pluralism is a "proof" of freedom and independence of individual action from any form of social coercion, becoming "self-rule" of society for social planning and evaluation. The plurality of opinions and beliefs attest to autonomy of the individual conceptions and it is official guarantee of value for decision-making: it refers directly to the communities as "cultural entities". There is, in essence, "a single horizon of thought and practice"; this awareness "guarantees pluralism and democracy that is based not on the certainty of a single truth, but on the plurality of thoughts and experiences" [28].

If the challenge of pluralism " is to lose attraction to extreme positions, relativistic or absolutist, and find a new way on relating to the issue of values, beliefs, ethics and, in general, to new democratic forms of relationship and coexistence" [29, 34], what implications can be drawn to the level of policies evaluation?

At least three: the belief that "in any particular situation it is should be discovered in which way - among a wide range of plausible assumptions - one can run a program" [30]; that there is no "automatism" between the various assumptions underlying a program and the events actually made; that the connection of each evaluation process with the specific context has generated a measure of intervention if it is necessary.

The common denominator of these assumptions is the impracticality of evaluation activities "engineered" and rationally oriented in order to disregard the social roots, the contextual and cultural action and require, among other things, the automatic ability of decision makers to "order preferences" and the possibility, on the basis of an unlimited availability of information, to analyze in advance all the consequences of the best possible decision in every circumstance [25].

This equates roughly to argue that social planning cannot be exhausted in the knowledge and application of the means-result model; that the criterion of "success" as a parameter of action-oriented end, severely clashes with the distortion and the vagueness of the same purposes; that the achievement of a goal differs radically from the inner satisfaction of a value [4]. In fact, the reflexive nature of social life invalidates any explanation of social change in terms of causal mechanisms" [31]: just a semantic description of the results of a social program can grasp its entirety the effects than originally thought as a solution to a problem and is not bound to any criterion of universal approval of the results described" [32].

In contrast to that objectifying, the hermeneutic and constructivist paradigm of evaluation [10] show a conception that conceives the social planning and evaluation process as space for the representation of different identities which, through ways of relating proactive and dialectical, enliven the public realm, in the direction of social and democratic emancipation of the actors involved. Everything gives a pragmatic characterization for evaluation as place of "the social distribution of knowledge" that does not "ratifies" actions but produces "symbolic universes" alternatives to those "crystallized", canons and institutional [33]. Here, the "relativization" of representative codes and communicative statements and the establishment of meaningful shared in specific contexts, assigns to the evaluation process a value "dialogical" [35]. It replaces the measures, consensus and "unilateral" agreement on solutions; allocates responsibilities for the best solution to a common problem; contrasts the obsession of technocratic expertise and efficiency with the negotiated planning, the critical examination of the "credibility" of the objectives of a

program and the appropriateness of intervention measures [36].

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